EYES OF THE RAINBOW SERPENT

GREG KUZNETSOV

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Dedicated to Lost

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART 1: CALL OF THE SERPENT 1

Prologue 1
1: A New Hope 3
2: Goorialla 12
3: The Visitor 16
4: Little Sydney 23
5: Cast List 27
6: Skipping Town 31
7: Team Meeting 34
8: The Reptile Hunter 41
9: Bad Dreams 46
10: Yellow Spotted Lizard 51
11: Air Sickness 54
12: On Set 61

PART 2: DEERAGUN 67

13: Deeragun 68
14: Laws of Nature 77
15: Tracking Experience 80
16: The Ceremony 91
17: The British Team 98
18: A Secret Place 104
19: Hitching a Ride 107
20: Going Rogue 111
21: Offer of Admission 121

22: The Hunt 125
23: The Incident 133
24: Left for Dead 137
25: The Cabin 140
26: Saving Deeragun 144
27: Air Force Two 151

PART 3: WALKABOUT 156

28: The Fifth Peak 157
29: The Boy 171
30: Songlines 175
31: Split Up 179
32: Old Town 183
33: Naralullgan 187
34: Eye of the Storm 191
35: Two Rivers Meet 195
36: War 206
37: Eyes of the Serpent 211
38: No Place Like Home 221

PART 1
CALL OF THE SERPENT

PROLOGUE

Deep beneath the ground, it rumbled. The man awaited it nearby, hiding himself in the grasslands. Then, it slowly arose, the ground cracking apart with its arrival, echoing a terrible roar, and striking fear in every living being within range of it. As it erupted out of the ground, the man caught a look at it, and he saw that it was larger in width than an elephant. As it soared towards the stars, the sky could not hope to encompass its entire body.

The increasing sight of it put a loud thumping in the man's heart, so loud that the serpent had noticed. It spun around and pulled its body towards the man, gliding across the grass, creating a deep gorge as it moved forward. As its eyes came into sight, the man froze—right until the serpent was right in front of his face, and there it stopped, locking eyes with the man. He was completely entranced by the eyes of the serpent—its beautiful, golden eyes, beyond anything he had ever seen. It was beyond the world of man. They both stared at each other as man and a god.

A storm began to form. The serpent opened its mouth, as if to provide shelter. The man walked into the mouth of the serpent, unfazed by any doubt, for he was entranced like a deer in headlights. And the

serpent closed its mouth and it was satisfied, for it had devoured him.

And then, the serpent went onwards, deep into the waters of the lake, for it was now free. The passage had been opened.

1
A NEW HOPE

The snake whizzed past him at lightning speed. The man remained still, calmly waiting for something—any other sign of movement that would reveal it.

Soon, the snake appeared in his view again, this time less fearful of a potential predator. It turned its head back and forth, eyes darting around and scanning the room, with its fangs ready to strike at any given moment. And then—the two locked eyes—as man and reptile, master and servant, a god and his subject.

The two lay still on their respective sides, both continually staring at each other. Each had their own invisible boundaries—it was a sign of respect. But this could not last long, as a predator cannot let its prey go—and prey will not go without a fight.

The man carefully lifted his hand, aiming right below the snake's mouth. The snake laid still, hoping that the man still did not notice it, as its light brown skin camouflaged amidst the wooden floor—with its fangs now ready to strike.

Finally, the man reached his hand forward and grabbed the snake without hesitation or fear, briskly avoiding what was sure to be a deadly and painful bite. The snake had been beaten. For now, the man was the master of this snake, having ended their

battle victoriously. The snake was now the prey, now captured.

The snake wrapped around the man's arm in submission. Everyone in the audience began to clap until the entire auditorium was filled with the sound of thunderous clapping and loud cheering. The man bowed, snake in hand.

This man was Dr. Robert Forrest, the well-known professor of herpetology in the biology department at Brown University. He had done this presentation for years, and it impressed the first-year students every single time.

Not once had he ever shown a glimpse of fear, a sign of backing out. This kind of confidence was only present after years of catching snakes in the wild all across the world. They all knew it—that's why they liked his class so much, filling it up within minutes, much like at the premiere of a movie. Robert Forrest was a living circus.

After the presentation, it was on to the boring stuff again. Robert would have to start to give boring lectures, listen to boring seminars and mark boring assignments, all this taking up the rest of the semester—a process that took only a few months, but felt like a hundred years for Robert, who was stuck in an endless limbo of marking mediocre assignments—ten years in.

As soon as the applause quieted to nothing, Robert placed the snake back in the box and closed it. He sighed. *See you next semester, buddy.*

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, was the Canberra bonesnake. I discovered it myself on a trip to Australia, and I did it all by myself, in span of a few days. And how did I do it?"

"*Research, planning, tracking and trapping*," the class repeated in a monotonous voice. It was clear that they were told this before, forced to memorize it from the very start of class and repeat it over and over until it was ingrained in their minds deeper than their childhood memories. It was like greeting a teacher in a language class—but with snakes instead of German.

In the back of his mind, Robert hated the rules, the routines, all of it. He had usually found most of his discoveries by accident or pure instinct. But you don't tell that to first years. Never mind the fact that they were forced to buy a thousand-page textbook on reptile tracking for the one semester course, which Robert had never read a single word of. Talk about living what you preach.

"That's right. And always remember, safety is number one. That's all for today—any questions?"

Fifty hands shot up immediately. As usual, Robert chose those who sat in the front first—this time, it was a blonde-haired man, someone he hadn't seen in his class before. But of course, people snuck into his lectures all the time. It was the circus of Brown University, as they called it.

"What was the biggest snake you've ever caught on the show?"

Robert sighed—another question about the show. The show, the show, the show. They never stop asking about the show. "Well, the show was mostly overdramatized. It wasn't completely fake, but we set up a lot of the scenes and usually caught the snakes with a team of professionals beforehand. You'd better ask me what the biggest snake that I caught OFF the show was instead, which was no doubt the Black-backed Anaconda, back down in

Florida. Thing was huge, five or six metres long. Those things take large nets to catch. They can eat an entire-"

Robert paused. He suddenly realized that he was drifting off topic. "Anyways, getting off-topic. Next question."

This time, he pointed to a young lady next to the blonde man. She was a memorable student, as she had some of the highest grades in the entire class, or university for that matter. But he could never remember her name; although Robert had a photographic memory, he still had trouble remember names, or even faces. It was the definition of irony present in his life.

"What was your single scariest experience on the show?"

Robert sighed once more. Every single year, all they ever asked him about was the show. He has a strong urge to complain, rant about how all everybody knew him for was a reality show that got cancelled years ago. Not, of course, his own real discoveries from years of hard work on the field.

But he had to answer. If it was interesting to other people, then so be it. Embrace the celebrity status.

"Well, I guess it was when that python nearly bit off my left cheek." Robert began to tell the story intensely, as he always had found a way to tell it at least once per year. He didn't have the heart to tell people the python was de-fanged anyways—and it was all mostly staged by his crew, who irritated the python on purpose. But he loved telling stories too much to ruin the magic of it.

Finally, he finished the story, leaving the class open-jawed and wide-eyed. His favourite part of telling the story was the reaction after, no doubt

leading away a couple of potential researchers from a career in reptile hunting. But it was a competitive enough field anyways.

This time, Robert decided to pick someone sitting in the back of the class for a question. These were usually the lazy ones, and the shy ones. The auditorium for his class had grown so big over the years that his eyes could barely pierce through the packed crowd, trying to make out hands from blurred blobs.

"Is the legend of the rainbow serpent true?"

Robert paused for a moment. This was new for him—nobody had asked him that question for years. He thought that question had already faded into nothing, just like the legend itself.

Still, he was a teacher. It was his job to educate them, and teach them all he knew. So he told them the story anyways.

"Well, there is a legend...somewhere deep within the Australian outback, there lies a rainbow serpent. One that existed before the Dreamtime... before there were bushes and forests, and before people ever walked the land."

Robert observed the crowd. They were completely entranced—ripe for this tale.

"It travelled all across the world, forming mountains and ridges and gorges, creating rivers, and making all the markings of land. And then—it found people.

As soon as the serpent arrived, a storm began. Two brothers from one tribe, who were looking for a place to ride out the weather, came to the serpent for shelter," continued Robert. "The serpent opened its mouth and let them inside under the guise of a kind favour. And as soon as they entered the

serpent's mouth, it devoured them. In the morning, when the rest of the tribe went to look for the two brothers, they were gone without a trace. They saw the terrifying tracks of the rainbow serpent, and they knew that it had eaten them. And it was never seen again, nor was it wished to be seen."

There, Robert stopped the story, leaving the class—every single one of them— once again amazed. That familiar look of pure curiosity flashed across all of their faces. If there was one thing Robert was good at, it was telling stories.

"And if the legend is true? Well, that's up to you to decide. But nobody has ever found anything like a rainbow serpent. If they had, it would be... one of the greatest discoveries of our time," added Robert. Looking around at all of their faces, he knew that he had just created at least a few future researchers like him.

After the class ended, Robert was nearly trampled over by the huge number of students who came up to him and begged for more questions. Instead of answering them all, Robert managed to flee return to his office. He had some old files to organize.

As soon as Robert sat down on his desk, a deep feeling of sadness hit him. He knew that he would be stuck at Brown forever, chained to his desk and being forced to mark student papers until his retirement and eventual death. It was a depressing feeling. But, he was much too old to get back on the

field now. The young age—the agility—it had all slipped away so fast...

Just as Robert reached for the file cabinet there was a knock on the door. Robert sighed—he just couldn't catch a break.

"No visitors, I told you guys this already back at the class!" yelled Robert as he opened the door. But outside, there wasn't a student—it was someone else. Someone familiar.

"What would you say if someone had found the rainbow serpent?" Robert squinted his eyes—he recognized that voice. Just before considering Lasik eye surgery, he quickly realized that it was none other than Dr. Frederick Allanby himself, the most prestigious professor in all of Brown University—head of the biology department, now clearly back from his month-long search for a rare type of jellyfish.

Robert and Allanby were once rivals in the field, but they were much too old for that now—presently, they were simply friends.

"Gotta give you an official warning for interrupting my office time," Robert said. They both laughed and shook hands. "Glad to see you again, Robert," said Allanby. Robert immediately noticed that Allanby had developed a slight Australian accent.

"So, where have you been?" Robert asked.

"As you know, I've been on a small expedition to Australia over the past few weeks. It started off with looking for some kind of jellyfish, until we found something that changed our plans entirely...well, have a look."

Allanby took out his phone and revealed to Robert an image of a small girl by a few trees. At first,

Robert was confused. Then, Allanby pointed to a small brownish figure beneath the trees, peeking out right next to the girl's feet. "Look."

And then, Robert saw it. A perfect image of a snake, and not just any snake. It was similar in size to the commonly known Eastern Brown snake, but it had an amazingly interesting rainbow tint to it. Robert was immediately entranced by the photo.

Allanby looked back at Robert, and they both knew that they shared the same sense of excitement.

"And if you think it's just a photo, could be photoshopped, well-" Allanby began to swipe through a dozen more photos, which showcased a series of snake tracks along red sand, alongside some poor rodent victims with snake bites on their necks.

"It's real. We're sure. The rainbow serpent all those Aborigines were talking about for 50,000 years wasn't just a legend after all—they were referring to a real snake all along. And we're going to find it."

"Are you serious? Do you have a team for this, or...?"

"Oh, don't worry. I'm going to fish out the best people on campus for a team to go with me on this expedition. We're not gonna have trouble with that, especially after your little lecture there. And I know how much this snake means to you, and now that you're retiring in the summer...well, it's certain that you'll be on that team."

"Holy smokes. We're really doing this. Coming to Australia and coming out with the discovery of a lifetime..." For the first time in years, Robert felt exhilarated with something beyond passion—just pure instinct, set in place inside him years before

his own birth, something that would allow him to do anything. Pure determination.

"Yeah. And it gets even better. I'll post the team members that I selected on my office door tomorrow."

"Can't wait. Thank you for this, Fred."

"Not a problem. See you there, Robert."

"See you."

And with that, Allanby left the room, leaving Robert alone, with a reborn sense of determination—a determination to finally and once and for all achieve his destiny.

2
GOORIALLA

"Far off in the Dreamtime, there were no animals or birds, no trees or bushes, and no hills or mountains.

The country was flat. Goorialla, the great Rainbow Serpent, stirred in the earth and set off to look for his own tribe. He travelled across Australia from the south to the north. He eventually reached Cape York where he stopped and made a big red mountain called Naralullgan. He listened to the wind and heard only voices speaking strange languages. He thought to himself:

This is not my country; the people here speak a different tongue. I must look for my own people.

Goorialla left Naralullgan and his huge body made a deep gorge onto where he came down. He travelled to the north for many days and his tracks made the creeks and rivers as he journeyed north. Goorialla made two more mountains; one of the Naradunga was long and made of granite; the other had sharp peaks and five caves and was called Minalinha."

One day, Goorialla heard singing and said, *Those are my people, they are holding a big Bora.* At the meeting place of the two rivers, Goorialla found his own people singing and dancing. He watched for a long time, then he came out and was welcomed by

his people. He showed the men how to dress properly and taught them to dance. A big storm was gathering, so all of the people built humpies for shelter.

Two young men, who some called the Bil-bil or the Rainbow Lorikeet brothers, came looking for shelter but no one had any room.

The Bil-bil brothers went to Goorialla who was snoring in his humpy, but he had no room. The rain got heavier and the boys went back to Goorialla and complained that the rain was heavy. Goorialla said to them, *All right, you can come in now.* The brothers ran into Goorialla's mouth and he swallowed them.

Then he began to worry about what the people would say when they found the boys missing. He decided to travel north to Bora-bunaru, the only great natural mountain in the land. The next morning, the people found that the boys were gone and saw the tracks of Goorialla, and knew that he had swallowed them.

You may never see these lakes or mountains, but after the rain you will see his spirit in the sky, which is the rainbow. This is the reason why he is called Goorialla, the Rainbow Serpent."

For a moment, the child said nothing. Instead, he stared at his father's eyes in wonder, not knowing which of the million questions he had to ask first.

Finally, the child spoke the thing that hammered on his mind the most. "Where is the rainbow serpent, dad?"

The boy's father paused for a while to ponder on the question. It was difficult even for him to answer this, and his mind came to a blank for a few moments. Then, he said, "It doesn't matter. You won't find it—unless it wants you to."

"What if it wants me to?"

"Then he'll have a nice meal." The father chuckled. Out of the right pocket of his hunter-like cargo pants, where he kept the most precious of things from his journeys, he took out a small bracelet and held it up in front of the boy. "This—this is a great treasure. I found it on one of my trips."

The bracelet had nine small beads on it, each a different colour coming together to form a rainbow. It was all held together by a thin blue rope.

"If you ever feel the need, the calling-" he placed the bracelet on the child's hand and closed it. "This will guide your way."

The child examined the bracelet, carefully inspecting every single bead. "Have you ever seen it?"

"Seen what?"

"The rainbow serpent."

"Yes. I saw it crawl past me once. But I could never quite catch it—I guess it didn't want to be caught."

After a brief moment of silence, the father decided to get up and leave the room, as much time had passed from the beginning of night.

"Where are you going, dad?" asked Robert.

"I'm going to leave for a while. I have to do something, to save our family. But I'll come back

one day, I promise." And with that, he closed the door and left, his mind set on his next trip, one from which he knew he would never return from.

The boy, meanwhile, would never be able to sleep that night, as his mind remained infested with thoughts of the legend of the rainbow serpent. From that day onwards, he was forever set on one day finding it.

3
THE VISITOR

When Robert finally reached his house after his long day at campus, the first thing he did was go over to his fridge to have a drink.

Something brushed up against his leg and Robert jumped, having flashbacks to his days in Australia, where a brush up with anything could mean a venomous bite. He looked down, only to see that it was just his beloved pet snake.

"Hey, Ralph." He grabbed the snake and let it move around his shoulder. Robert opened the fridge, and found that there was only one bottle of the finest stuff left.

As he reached for the bottle, for the first time in a while, he realized that he didn't feel up to it. Something inside him had awoken ever since Allanby had returned with the news, and it changed his outlook on everything.

Robert shut the fridge. The light of the fridge evaporated, letting in the darkness of the house. Robert's hair stood up on the back of his head to greet this—another thing which never seemed to bother him before. Ralph slithered down his shoulder and onto the ground, only making Robert more nervous about turning around to confront whatever his senses thought was in the darkness.

Finally, he had enough, and quickly went over to flip on the light switch.

He spun around. Nothing there.

Suddenly, Robert felt a strange sensation in his head. Tiny whispers coming from nowhere began to flood the house. Robert held his ears shut and closed his eyes, but the whispers wouldn't stop.

"Just side effects," he said. "Just side effects. This isn't real. This isn't real." Robert opened his eyes. The voices were gone. He sighed in relief.

Robert went over to his backyard shed, where he was ready to partake in his weekly tradition of burning copies of DVDs of his TV show, Reptile Hunter. The campfire had already been set up from the morning, with rocks and everything that was needed to keep the whole house from burning down in his drunken escapades. The most important rule: safety is always number one.

Digging inside the large bag in the shed holding his stacks of DVDs, Robert felt that there was only one left. How could he have not noticed this, even if he was drunk? Last week it seemed that there were at least a few dozen copies left.

Then again, maybe he did remember burning a couple extra more on the account of a particularly large amount of autograph signings on that day the campus had an open house for potential new students.

Still, Robert grabbed the last DVD in the bag and proceeded to stare at the cover for one last time—a beautiful design, one from Season 2, where there was a picture of Robert with a large green python wrapped around him. Robert rubbed the snake's popping scales—you could actually feel the cover. Too bad it would have to burn.

He threw it in the fire. This was his favourite activity of the week. He loved the way it slowly burned, melting into blackness, and then into nothing but the abyss. In the morning, nothing would be left behind but ash—and hopefully his memory of the show would be long gone too.

No more autographs, no more unsolicited calls, and no more strangers walking up to him on the street. Now that would be a paradise.

Sadly, Robert knew that all the fire did was burn the artificial DVD, not the spiritual aftermath of it. And it was harder than ever to even imagine all of his memories fading away into ash, which was normally easy to do under the influence. Even more so, he got a delivery of dozens of free copies of his DVDs every week—it was a part of the deal.

Robert began to think of better times. Times when he could walk along the beach for hours, staring into oblivion, thinking of nothing. Nothing but being with her.

After about an hour, Robert decided to leave the ritual burning early and head over to bed. But no matter how hard he tried, he still couldn't bring himself to sleep. He still couldn't understand that feeling calling out to him. The return of Allanby had somehow thrown his entire day off course.

Now nothing felt right anymore.

Ralph soon appeared on the bed and slithered above Robert's head. This gave him comfort, but also a new idea. He took out his computer and began to do some research on the rainbow serpent again, looking up old Aboriginal stories about it. There was one particular story which he had still memorized to this day—the one his father had told him all those years ago.

On the web, Robert saw the very same picture which Dr. Allanby had showed him, and became entranced by the snake's beautiful rainbow tint for a solid five minutes. But it raised a question. If Robert could see this so easily online, who else would? Didn't Allanby care about competition? Robert had always worked hard to hide his own private research expeditions.

Suddenly, the doorbell of his house rang. Robert checked the clock—12:30AM. Who in the world rings a doorbell at this hour? He ran down to the door quickly and peaked out of the blinders to see who it was. By that time, it was so dark that he couldn't tell.

Robert opened the door regardless. A well-dressed black man in a raincoat with a tie greeted him, carrying a suspicious-looking suitcase in his hand.

"Hello, Mr. Forrest."

Robert paused for a moment to take in his confusion, and then he replied with, "Who are you?"

"I work at the airport. We've been calling you for four weeks now." He raised the suitcase up to Robert's view. "This suitcase contains your father's things, including a last will and testament."

Robert could not hide his shock. His jaw dropped wide open. But his innermost feeling was confusion.

"I lost that suitcase at the airport *years* ago. I think it was twenty-five years ago, to be exact. So, are you telling me that you've come to my house at midnight to give me a suitcase that you just happened to find *now*? After twenty-five years? Doesn't lost luggage eventually go to goodwill?"

The man said nothing. He placed down the suitcase down on the front porch bench. "There is a

combination lock on the suitcase. The password is 1125. Good luck."

Before Robert could ask any more questions, the man left the house. As Robert observed him, he noticed that the man didn't seem to have a car, and simply walked off into the distance like a homeless man.

Maybe it was just a homeless man. Maybe the suitcase had a bomb in it. Robert thought of chasing the man and handing back the suitcase, but his curiosity surrounding it was too strong. Besides, it reminded him of something—maybe it was nostalgia. It was certainly something.

Robert placed the suitcase down on his bed and punched in the password on the keypad—1125. It cracked open like a walnut.

No explosion. Phew.

Immediately, what stood out to Robert the most was the bracelet—laid out like a diamond ring at a jewelry store. It was something he had not seen in twenty-five years, but recognized immediately—an important relic, long lost and forgotten—until now.

There was nothing else apparent inside the suitcase—just the bracelet. He didn't remember packing that with him on his move to the United States all those years ago. Strange.

Robert took out the bracelet and examined it. Every bead of the bracelet was clearly made out of some kind of a cheaply painted rock, but each individual bead had some sort of coloured tint to it—just like the rainbow serpent in the photo—which made them all collectively beautiful.

It was a relic from the past—so small by now, that he could no longer fit it onto his large adult hand.

Robert felt the suitcase for a second layer, and soon found that a black sheet covered more items below the bracelet—including an enclosed letter directed to Robert, and a small worn out journal.

He took out the letter first.

"*Dear Robert,*" he read, "*If you are reading this, I am now dead. I have one question to ask you; do you still remember the story of the rainbow serpent? If so, enclosed inside my journal is a map. I have developed this map over years of study and research. It is no coincidence that you have found it at whatever time period you have found it in.*

Godspeed,

B. Forrest."

Robert reached for the small journal. Flipping through the pages, he saw thousands of words of cursive writing, almost illegible, littered with strange diagrams and drawings. Out of the notebook fell a small wrinkled map on a white sheet.

He examined it. At the very top, it plainly read "DEERAGUN". Their hometown. But the map itself was completely nonsensical. It was just a series of random symbols connected by lines—not even in chronological order, not even based on any measurable distance—just a disaster.

Robert carefully examined the letter again for clues or anything to figure out where this magical delivery came from. Strangely, the letter was mailed to him two weeks ago by someone named 'John Kamen'. Robert had never heard that name before in his entire life. Then again, he wasn't the best with remembering names.

After Ralph started crawling into the suitcase and examining it for himself, Robert deemed it much too late to attempt to figure out the mystery of the

suitcase, and he decided to head off to dreamland, placing the suitcase underneath the bed, but keeping the bracelet in his hand.

For the rest of the night, Robert slept deeply. He thought of old stories, the ones his father had told him about the rainbow serpent, and of better times.

They were better times, indeed.

4
LITTLE SYDNEY

On Friday of 1998, Robert finally arrived at the capital city of Canberra after a long car drive from his home in Melbourne. He was on the hunt for a rare type of snake which had recently been spotted in the coastal regions of the city, and he was of course promised a monetary reward for its capture.

The existence of this particular snake, however, was a stretch. Robert had chased snakes and lizards based on glimpses of photographs before, or even just mere tracks. But nobody in the world had ever seen the Canberra bonesnake, even behind the artificial eyes of a camera.

As soon as Robert arrived, he didn't waste time in a hotel room fighting off house flies, as most tourists in Australia would do. All he needed was a compass, some water, and his trusty snake stick, and he would be set. He had no idea if the snake was poisonous or not—it was an unproved legend at best, and venom information wasn't available. But no matter what happened, he would have to carry it in his backpack. Crates were too expensive—and too heavy—to carry.

The beach, when Robert first arrived there, was beautiful. The dawning sun perfectly reflected against the clear, still waters. Robert even thought about giving up the hunt for a while and going for a

swim, but the sun would disappear soon. You don't hunt snakes by moonlight—or swim, for that matter.

There were a lot of open sand holes on the beach, as well as small crevices in the dirt nearby. Robert checked each and every one of them for snakes, at the personal risk of himself, of course. There were spiders, cockroaches, and even rats—but no snake.

At one point, Robert stuck his stick inside a larger hole and a golden snake had come out—he was so excited that it might be the rare Canberra snake he was looking for, but he was mistaken, and tripped on the ground, letting the snake loose.

Behind him, someone laughed. Robert got up, the sand now covering half of his face, and turned to see the joker.

To his surprise, it was a blonde woman—and not just any blonde woman, but the most beautiful blonde woman he had ever seen in his life. He was star struck—frozen—in the same way that most people would freeze upon seeing a giant spider.

But this was no spider.

"What are you doing down here, looking at holes and not swimming?" she asked him, with a heavy, Australian accent.

"Looking for snakes," replied Robert. "Well, particularly one snake. It's a local legend here. I'm hoping that I'll find it somewhere in these holes but—as you can see, no luck so far."

The woman laughed. "That bonesnake they've all been talking about? Well, my name's Claire, and I'm a local legend too. So how about you come with me to the beach and look for the snake later?"

Robert thought about the offer for a moment. He raised his snake stick. "I can really feel that the snake is close, though."

"Oh, really?"

"Yep." Robert poked Claire with the stick. She laughed. They both ran to the beach, chasing after each other, until they collapsed into the beautiful clear water together.

That evening, Robert would indeed find the snake, tripping over a small grass hole on the way back to his hotel with Claire. The snake was one of the most beautiful captures in his career—as promised by legend, it had a light brown and bony-like appearance, and it even seemed transparent.

Claire wasn't as impressed with the snake as he was. "Why do you need to find all of these snakes so much, anyways?"

He placed the snake in his backpack. It was rather calm, and clearly not poisonous. Lucky break from last time.

"It's a living. And, well, I'm hoping to eventually find the big one."

"What's the big one?"

"You'd think I'm crazy if I told you."

"Tell me."

"Ever heard of the rainbow serpent? It's an Australian legend dating back over 50,000 years ago."

"For real? A real, rainbow snake? No way," Claire said. For once in their hour-long conversation about snake catching, she finally seemed even remotely interested in the idea of purposefully handling a slimy reptile.

"My father once looked for it... he just disappeared into the Outback one day, and we never

saw him after that. But he was close. I think I know the exact place where it's supposed to be. After I get enough money from catching other stuff, I'm going to go and try to find it full time."

"Too bad you'll be spending too much time with me." They both laughed.

That night, Robert no longer thought about tracking snakes. For the first time in years, he was truly happy to stay where he was, with Claire, forever.

5
CAST LIST

The next morning, Robert went straight to campus an hour earlier than usual as not to miss the casting announcement for Dr. Allanby's expedition team. But he found the campus to be entirely empty—practically a ghost town.

Before assuming that he had actually arrived on the weekend and made a huge mistake in wasting gas, Robert realized that a giant crowd was beginning to form in the biology hall. He went inside only to find hundreds of people—encompassing almost all of the students and staff of the university.

All of them were crowded behind a small white sheet with a list on it—a list of all the names of the people who were chosen for the expedition.

Robert ran for it, bumping against random people in the large crowd waiting to see the list. But as soon as he read it, his heart leapt out of his chest.

"DARREN WALTERS —TRAPPER"
"ANNA B. GREENSIDE —VENOM EXPERT"
"BENJAMIN GALE —RESEARCHER"
"FRANK PORTER —TRACKER"
"LESTER LABRADOR —PHOTOGRAPHER"

Robert was shocked. Allanby promised him that he would be on the team—ready and selected, no

application required. What happened overnight that changed his mind?

At that very moment, Allanby came out of his office and was immediately surrounded by the large crowd of students and staff—some angry, some happy, demanding answers for why *they* weren't chosen for the team. And Robert was a part of that angry mob. The only difference was that he was actually supposed to be chosen.

But Allanby wasn't there for talk. "Back off, everybody! Just going to get some coffee!"

Robert quickly chased after him, bumping into students and teachers left and right. Eventually, he managed to catch up.

"What happened up there? I thought you said I would be on the team?"

Allanby continued walking. "Well, I changed my mind, Robert. Simple as that. There were just better people out there."

"*No*! Wait, stop. What do you mean? I have the most experience out of anyone in this campus in catching snakes."

"What, you mean that show?" Allanby chuckled. "I don't need to hire celebrities on my team. No amateurs here. Besides, we already have a snake tracker and a trapper."

"Do you need a list of every single thing that I've found before the show ever aired?" Robert raised his hand and began to count his fingers. "Newhaven jellyfish. Canberra bonesnake. Black-backed anaconda. New Jersey anaconda. Do I need to keep going?"

"I don't care, Robert." He turned to face him. "Let me explain this to you as simply and clearly as I can—I don't hire out of pity. When I hired you as a

professor, I did it because we needed more exposure and you had just come off the show. When I told you about the snake, I did it so you wouldn't find it out from someone other than me. Your acceptance into the team was never a guarantee. Simple as that. Tell me, what's the first chapter of the reptilian manual, huh? That first-year textbook?"

Robert said nothing.

"That's right. I've seen you on your little trips before. You don't know anything about catching snakes."

Allanby began to leave. Robert stepped right in front of him. "I've been to Australia before. Three times."

"That's good for you. I've been there before too. I don't care—we don't need any more tour guides."

A thousand questions rang through Robert's mind. Why the sudden change of heart? Why had they been friends for nearly a decade and had all of a sudden become rivals again? Why was Allanby suddenly acting like a schoolchild, out of the blue?

Suddenly, Allanby's phone rang—a rare occurrence. Neither Robert nor any of the students had ever seen Allanby having or using a phone—he always borrowed other people's phones, like the one he used to show Robert the pictures. As Allanby took the phone out of his pocket, Robert noticed that the phone was small, ancient—still with buttons instead of a touch screen. He wanted to laugh at it but held it in.

"Yes?" asked Allanby. He motioned for Robert to leave him alone.

Robert ignored him, and followed Allanby around as despite his attempts to dodge him. He heard faint arguing on the other side of the phone. "No! Why

would you call just to tell me this?" yelled Allanby. "No! I'm not doing it! I'm not hiring him!"

Robert jumped. Was Allanby referring to him? Who would call Allanby in the middle of his work hours and ask to help Robert get hired? Or maybe it was just the parents of another student, asking to be on the team.

But then, Allanby placed the phone down and turned to Robert. His expression changed from anger and frustration to vague interest, seemingly confirming Robert's suspicions. "Robert, have you ever been to Deeragun?"

Robert thought of lying for a moment, as to avoid suspicion. After all, the second rule of reptile hunting is that you never tell the competition when you have a golden egg. Then, something overtook him, and he nodded his head.

"Alright," said Allanby, hanging up the phone. "You're hired on the team, but only as a guide."

6
SKIPPING TOWN

"Mom?" asked the small, blonde haired six year old. "Where are we going?"

"I told you," the woman replied. "We're going to a new place. A better place. Somewhere where we can start a new life."

"Perth?" asked Robert.

She chuckled. "No. Somewhere farther. A new country."

Robert didn't ask any more questions. They soon reached the boarding gate of the plane. A nice flight attendant was standing there, who smiled at him.

Robert placed his suitcase on the ground and sat on it. After a while, Robert noticed that his mother was arguing with the flight attendant. Only then did he stop daydreaming and tuned into what they were talking about.

"No, I paid all of my savings for this ticket! I can't just go home and book again!" yelled his mother.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. We can't give you any refunds. It's our policy, there's nothing I can do," said the flight attendant. She seemed nervous—Robert felt bad for her. She then walked over and began to close the gate. Robert watched out of the large glass window as the last of the passengers boarded the plane.

"No! Wait, stop! You can't do this to us!"

For a while, nobody replied. The flight attendant ignored her and left. His mother went over to the benches and sat down on them with Robert, not saying anything and just sulking. Waiting for something to happen.

Finally, a tall dark-skinned man who looked like a pilot came up to her.

"Ma'am," he said, "we have a second flight going to Omaha in five hours. If you're willing to wait, I could transfer your tickets in order for you to get on that flight."

His mother immediately smiled and stood up to shake his hand. "Thank you so much. Thank you." She did a little bow, and proceeded to grab Robert by the hand and together, they followed the pilot over to another gate. Outside, Robert noticed that it had begun to rain. He was entranced by it—he had always been entranced by the rain. He began to wonder if there would still be storms wherever they were going—and then, another thought popped into his mind as they neared the washrooms.

"Can I go to the washroom, mom?" he asked his mother.

"Sure. Go."

Robert ran over to the washrooms and did his business. While washing his hands, the same dark-skinned man from earlier approached him in his cool and slick pilot uniform. Robert wanted to own that uniform—he wished he could be a pilot one day, or at least sit next to the pilot in the plane. Robert smiled at the man, but he seemed angry.

"Don't go, Robert."

"What?"

"You can't go on this trip. You mustn't go. Stay here in Australia with your mother. Please."

Robert said nothing. He was confused. "But I can't force you to do anything. If you leave this place, you must promise me that you'll come back," said the man.

Again, Robert said nothing. Starting to get frightened, he bolted back to his mother, who was sat on the seats by the new gate.

Robert looked behind him to check for the man, but there was nobody around anymore. Looking back out the window, Robert noticed that the rain had cleared outside. A small rainbow appeared in the distance, over the horizon. Robert had never seen a rainbow as beautiful as this one. For a few minutes, he was totally mesmerized by it, and forgot everything that he was thinking about.

When Robert finally pointed the rainbow out to his mother, it disappeared.

7
TEAM MEETING

At Allanby's office, the whole team had gathered together along with Allanby to discuss the expedition.

Allanby went up and introduced himself to every team member individually. Robert had already recognized two of them from his own class—it appeared that most of the people who signed up were, in fact, inspired by his lecture. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to encourage so much competition—or maybe it was a good thing after all. His father's mistake was that he had attempted to traverse the Outback alone, after all.

When it came to Robert's turn to be introduced, Allanby didn't shake his hand, and instead simply said, almost as if it was a half remark, "Oh, and this is my colleague Robert Forrest. He'll be joining us as a guide."

"Not just a guide. Also-" Before Robert could say any more, he was quickly interrupted by Allanby and shut down.

"As you know, we've got a snake-" Allanby showed the team the picture with the little girl on a slideshow projector. "-but what I didn't tell the campus yet is that we also have a location."

Allanby unveiled a large map, which was of a town called Deeragun, the name of which was circled, right next to the town of Newhaven. Robert immediately recognized the layout—it was his own hometown. The same place where his father had chased that snake. Of course it had to be that town. Of course. That was the reason Allanby needed him. Robert felt strange as everyone in the room examined his own hometown. And yet, apparently only Allanby knew that Robert had lived there.

On the map, a couple of locations were highlighted in blue, which Allanby said were the locations of the most recent sightings by the locals. Three other locations were in red, which Allanby explained were the most likely places for the snake to be in, due to weather and other factors such as that.

Robert thought back to the map in the suitcase. It was times like these that he felt lucky to have his photographic memory, but he also felt nervous for when he would inevitably forget all of the team member's names when working with them out in the field. In his mind, the mental snapshot of the map didn't seem to have any relation to Allanby's map of the actual town, but he did distinctly remember a layout of houses on the map.

"What's that?" asked Ben, pointing to the two yellow circles highlighting two small cabins on the lower east side of the town.

"That's where we'll be staying, thanks to the nice hospitality of the locals of Deeragun, as well as a hefty amount of funding from our investors."

"We *never* get investors for our trips. Our university's too small to fund itself. Only famous thing about us is Dr. Forrest," interrupted Anna, looking to Robert.

Allanby smiled. "That's why this is such a big trip. Think about it—a rainbow snake, just like the one from the Australian Aboriginal legend? Myth based on fact? Let alone the fact that the applications of a rainbow snake's DNA could change the world—that's millions of bucks, right there."

"If we find it, that is," said Robert. The room stayed silent at that.

"Well, that's why we have you," said Allanby. "Good thing you've already been to Australia before. Gonna guide the whole team away from the giant spiders down there." The whole group laughed.

After the meeting, the whole team headed down the hall to celebrate the expedition at a party organized by Dr. Allanby.

Robert considered leaving right there and then, hoping to catch some cold ones at the convenience store, until Anna privately met up with Robert outside the doors.

"Robert, I think that you're the only one I can trust. I don't know about this trip," she explained. "What kind of people would fund a wild goose chase for a rainbow snake?"

"We've got a lot of evidence for it," said Robert.

"Not really. I mean, a photograph of a rainbow tint, which could be photoshopped or even painted on the snake, and some tracks which could just be from an eastern brown? Not really."

Robert paused for a moment to think about Anna's deductions, but then, he started to recognize

her face. Only then, did he remember where she came from—first row at the lecture. Perfect student. He smiled.

"It's still something."

"You know what I think? Allanby's crazy in debt as the head of our department, and he's staged this aimless hunt so we could have a nice vacation and maybe some extra cash from the media attention. But hey, I could be wrong."

Before Robert could converse with Anna any more, she left for the party.

Robert began to feel nervous about the trip. He had never even considered questioning the evidence—he just wasn't that type of person, he was an optimist—an idealist. He'd looked for the snake before on his own, but it was true—it was mostly a wild goose chase. It had been like chasing his own shadow. It was also true that he was distracted and couldn't finish the search in time—but that wasn't a huge factor in this particular trip.

Still, whether or not the whole expedition was a sham, Robert felt something inside him pressuring him to go. Even if it was all for the money, there was still a chance. After all, it appeared that his father had done it before. Allanby couldn't be crazier than Robert's own father had been, right?

Soon after Anna left, Robert decided to go to the party to calm his nerves, and potentially get some free alcohol. When he arrived, it had already been an hour and there were not many students left. Robert was most disappointed to find that there was no wine left. The loudspeakers were replaying the same hits over and over again, signs of a lazy or non-existent DJ.

But Robert was still hungry. He helped himself to a slice of some of the leftover cake. Just as he couldn't find a fork, and contemplated eating it like an animal with his mouth, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Robert spun around. It was Allanby.

"Enjoying that cake?" he asked. "It had a rainbow snake on it before they all had a bite of it. Not a real one, though. Edible version." He laughed.

"I guess," Robert replied nervously.

"You okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Robert decided not to tell Allanby about the potential mutiny surrounding him. "I'm good. Just tired."

"I've just been coming up to tell everyone that I forgot to give them their tickets. We're leaving the day after tomorrow, one-way flight to Queensland. And it's first class, private plane—investors really must've liked us, I guess. Here's yours."

Allanby handed Robert a small plane ticket. Robert wanted to ask why Allanby had said *one-way,* but decided to keep it to himself, placing the ticket in his back pocket. He also remembered just then that he had left the rainbow bracelet in his right pocket.

"Oh, and Robert..." suddenly, Dr. Allanby's face turned from friendly to a pure, deep rage. Robert had never seen that kind of expression before in a man—his eyes were filled with hatred, in an instant, like the snap of a finger.

Allanby leaned in towards Robert and whispered, "That snake is mine. You hear me? I've invited you as a little petty favour for your retirement year, but I'm going to be the one taking credit for the discovery, like it or not. The time for your stupid

show, where you pretend to catch snakes, is over. That snake is mine. Understand?"

With that, Allanby left the room. Robert stood still in a state of absolute shock, nearly dropping the cake on the floor.

After having a bite of the cake, Robert headed home early. He already started to feel some sort of a sick feeling in his stomach—most likely food poisoning from the cake, and Allanby's turn into insanity hadn't helped. But even more strangely, the whispers from the previous night had returned, just as soon as he stepped outside of campus.

At first, the whispers were nearly silent and untranslatable. Eventually, they got louder and louder, fading from an unknown language into real words, loud enough so that it felt like someone was standing right next to him. Loud enough so that Robert could no longer dismiss it as the effects of food poisoning, but rather consider investing in a paranormal investigator.

Robert started to feel as if the students were making fun of him—perhaps they were the voices. Left and right, people whispered. "*He's crazy.*" Hoping he wouldn't see them. "*Crazy.*" Glancing at him and giggling. "*Stupid show.*" "*Failure.*" "*Glad he got cancelled.*" "*His wife died.*" "*He's going crazy.*"

"*Crazy.*"

"*Crazy.*"

Robert slammed his hands over his ears and started yelling to drown out the voices, closing his

eyes shut. Finally, they stopped. Robert looked around to see a bunch of students staring at him, but nobody was whispering at him behind his back. He sighed in relief—just food poisoning. Just the after-effects. Calm down.

Soon, the voices were replaced by a large headache. And then, the whispering returned, this time much deeper from inside him, and in a different language. Not a normal language—an ancient one.

Suddenly, something flashed into his mind. Just for a brief second—an image. Something with rainbow scales, and golden eyes.

And with that, everything turned to black. Robert collapsed on the ground.

He was soon awoken by an unknown face, only seconds later. A younger student with brown curly hair and a Finnish accent was there, helping him up.

"You okay, mister?" the student asked.

"Yeah. Just some food poisoning."

"Okay." The student looked at Robert as if he did not believe him. Suddenly, the student's expression turned into excitement, as he recognized Robert Forrest. Robert already knew what his next question would be:

"Can I have your autograph?"

8
THE REPTILE HUNTER

Robert opened his eyes. He turned over and sighed in relief, seeing Claire lying next to him in the bed. The sunlight from the window glistened in her irises as she gazed out at him, barely able to open her eyes after a deep night's sleep.

Robert stood up and walked over to the window. He gleamed at the beautiful view of Sydney—he had never been in a hotel room this nice before, one with such a nice view of the famous opera house. It was at times like this that he was reminded of the true amazing things that the human race can do—things that lead to amazing sights such as these. The sky was blue—not a single cloud there—the water was blue as well, clear, and fresh—people and their dogs walked on the streets, not a care in the world.

A perfect start to a perfect day.

Suddenly, the alarm sounded. Claire moved around in the bed, and Robert was quickly reminded of the stressful day ahead of him. "What time is it, Robert?" she yawned. "Aren't you late for the meeting by now?"

Robert paused for a moment, to take it all in, and then burst into action. Without visiting the washroom, he put on his suit and tie and left the hotel.

As he was too poor to afford a car, even as a professional snake catcher, he arrived to the said building by bike around five minutes late.

Robert thought that he would be panicked, but he felt a strange calmness in the moment he arrived to the building. The building was a tall skyscraper. Robert looked up at it and marvelled at its structure and height. It almost seemed that it was falling on him, from that distance high up. A huge logo read; "RED SUN STUDIOS SYDNEY".

Robert walked in through the revolving door. He quickly adjusted his tie and suit to appear more professional.

Immediately, a secretary greeted him. Robert said his name and sat down along with a bunch of other young men, who were rehearsing lines. This made him feel less nervous about being late, as it was clear the other side was held up in the overwhelming results of their casting call. Everyone wanted this job.

Robert approached a blonde man who was sitting next to him, and noticed that he was holding a piece of paper which appeared to be a script. "Were we supposed to print that, or...?"

"What? Everyone who gets called in for an interview is supposed to have this. You get it in the mail."

Robert gulped. "Do you happen to have an extra copy of that, by any chance?"

The man smiled. "Here. Take mine. I already memorized it anyways." He handed the paper to Robert and shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Dan Cooper."

"I'm Robert Forrest. Thanks." He skimmed the paper. It was a script for what seemed to be the introduction to the show.

Robert began to whisper the lines, attempting to memorize them. "I'm Robert Forrest, and I'm the reptile hunter. *I'm* the reptile hunter. I'm the *reptile* hunter. I'm *the* reptile hunter. I'm the *reptile hunter*."

Cooper leaned over to Robert. "I find that it works best if you put stress on the *reptile hunter*."

"Thanks," replied Robert.

Suddenly, a secretary came up to the group with a sheet of paper in her hand. "Next up should be... Robert Forrest, please."

Robert got up. He was led upstairs by the secretary on a grand spiral staircase—he had never seen one that size before. Even more impressive to him, was the fact that it was made out of glass. They *really* wanted people to show up for this casting call.

Robert turned back, where Cooper gave him a thumbs up and let out a whisper, "*Good luck*."

Eventually, Robert reached a small room where an older man in a suit was waiting for him. He was a little dirty and his tie was messed up. Robert quickly looked down to check his own tie, and straightened his out.

He sat down by the desk. The man said nothing, and simply looked over Robert's resume after taking it out from a file in the desk drawer. Robert continued to nervously straighten his suit and tie.

"So you have no actual experience in the film industry? Acting or behind the camera?"

Immediately, Robert recognized that the man was clearly a smoker. His voice croaked like a frog. This put him off.

"Well, uh, I was in a play when I was young. School play. Classic play."

"I see." The man didn't seem impressed. Robert gulped. The man read over Robert's resume for a few seconds more and then, he placed it down on the desk.

"Tell me, why should I hire you?"

Robert sighed. "Look. I know that I don't have much experience. I've been applying for jobs non-stop ever since I got here. No matter how hard I try, nobody seems to want to hire me. And they're right, I guess. I've been in America and Australia for years now, but I have nothing to show for it. I've never really worked a real job a day in my life."

Robert adjusted his tie. "But what I do have experience in is catching reptiles. It's my passion, ever since I was a child. Ever since I caught that first rare lizard when I was 6, I haven't stopped since then. I've caught all sorts of undiscovered animals, including snakes. Most recently, I was on the news for catching the Canberra bonesnake. They thought it was just a legend—I don't believe in legends. I believe in making things happen."

The man smiled. Now the interview was spinning stronger. "Maybe I don't have enough experience. Maybe I can't be an 'energetic host' and memorize lines. But all I know is that reptile hunting is my passion. I am a true reptile hunter, and I never stop chasing my dreams," continued Robert. "So please, just give me a chance."

The man stood up and looked out his office window, to all of the other candidates in suits, rehearsing lines on the couch. After a few moments, he looked back at Robert. Robert could immediately

tell that the man liked his speech—a surprise to him. This had never happened to him before.

"You know, most of TV is staged, or faked," the man said. "For once, I want to see something done with passion. Sincerity."

He turned to Robert. "Read the line."

Without looking back at the sheet, Robert said, with more confidence and passion than he had ever had in his entire life before, "I'm Robert Forrest, and I'm the reptile hunter."

The man smiled and shook Robert's hand. In his eyes, Robert saw confidence-which made him confident, in turn. But then, he also saw something else—the eyes of a predator.

And the prey—Robert Forrest. Staring right back at him. The sheep, the victim of the herding eye.

"Congratulations. You're in."

9
BAD DREAMS

For the entirety of the next day, Robert felt so terribly sick to his stomach that he could barely bring himself to call in sick to the university. Interestingly, he always felt the occasional deep ache in his stomach, but he never once threw up from it—which was extremely frustrating.

The whole day was a waste of time—no research, nothing. There was absolutely no progress being made. Robert spent the day in and out of bed, only leaving when he thought that he might finally throw up that damn rainbow snake cake, and have that brief moment of serene happiness—that cold feeling you get when you vomit out the remains of bad food. But still—even after the day's end—it never once happened. It was as if his own stomach was purposefully toying with him.

The next morning, on the day of the flight, Robert woke up with the feeling of the strongest stomach sickness he ever had in his life. He immediately ran over to the washroom and vomited into the toilet. Instant relief, as expected. However, to his great shock, Robert noticed that he had vomited out blood.

He couldn't afford any trips to the ER. Robert decided to ignore the blood and closed his eyes

instead, in a desperate attempt to calm himself down.

"It's just a dream. It's just a dream," he whispered the mantra to himself. He set his mind far away from the current time and instead thought about the beach... long walks on the beach. His favourite place.

Everything was fine.

Everything was good.

As he opened his eyes, Robert sighed in relief as he only saw the remains of a spoiled cake in the toilet. The sickness cleared. Finally, after a long day of near-vomiting, the cold feeling had come and it was all over.

Suddenly, something deep rung inside of Robert's ears. It rang louder and louder until Robert could not stand it and started to yell in agony. His vision began to blur until all he could see was a shade of white.

Then—it all cleared. Robert quickly found himself in a beautiful field of green grass, stretching out infinitely into oblivion under a blue sky. Once again, strange voices began to whisper to him, but he could not make out what language it was. He tried to feel the air around him, trying to make out the bedsheets and wake up from this terrible nightmare—but this was no dream. It felt more real than reality. It was beyond reality.

He began to see something in the distance—a shadowy figure that covered up the beautiful sky—like a giant kite. As it came down closer to him, Robert realized that it was the figure of a giant serpent, no doubt bigger in width than an elephant.

The flying serpent positioned itself to fly right towards Robert, coming down closer and closer

until he could make out the colour of its scales—rainbow. Robert froze, and was strangely calm. All he could think about was the beautiful glowing rainbow scales of the serpent—over and over, in his mind. The serpent zoomed forwards until he caught a glimpse of its beautiful golden eyes.

As the serpent rammed into his face, Robert was pushed back into the ground below, where the sky suddenly turned to flames and everything burned. Robert fell from the white of the sky and into the dark abyss below. With a final flash of the serpent's eyes, he woke up.

He was still in bed—never having gotten up since he managed to fall asleep. His bed was covered in sweat. He reached into his right pocket and grabbed on tightly to the bracelet—sighing in relief.

What was this dream? Some sort of a fever induced nightmare? But at the same time, it all felt so real... was it a warning, a message, perhaps a form of guidance? Or just a manifestation of his own worries? Robert decided to check the toilet, to see if maybe he had vomited out his sickness.

But his phone was ringing off the hook. He noticed that there were two dozen messages left for him—no doubt his worried teammates, thinking he might miss the flight. He checked the time—9:30AM.

There was no time to think about his bad dream episode.

Robert dashed across the house and took out a small brown suitcase from the attic—the same one he used for all of his trips. He hadn't been on one for years now—he had no time to reminisce, however. In the suitcase, he frantically placed a toothbrush, a printed picture of the snake, and his trusty snake stick. After putting his father's journal

in the pocket of his cargo pants, he made sure that the plane ticket was still in his back pocket, said goodbye to Ralph, and left his house.

While driving in his rusty Jeep, Robert eventually got lucky enough to catch up to the morning traffic. He slammed his hands against the steering wheel in frustration. He should've been at the airport by now. He checked the time—9:45AM, only around thirty minutes left to get to an airport which was a forty minute drive at most.

Robert swore under his breath, wishing that he had bought that house in Melbourne, right next to the airport. But if he had, he wouldn't be in this situation in the first place.

The phone rang—it was Dr. Allanby. Robert decided to answer it.

"Robert, where in the bush are you? The plane is BOARDING. Right now. Have you decided not to come, all of a sudden? We NEED you, Robert. Hurry up."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm driving. I'm—I *was* just a little sick." Robert began to think about the night of the party, and how Allanby had seemed to forget his random attack on Robert now that they were speaking over the phone.

"What do you mean you need me?" Robert asked.

"Hurry up, Robert." Allanby hung up.

Robert honked his horn, frustrated, but the traffic looked like it would not move. By then, it was pretty likely that his once-in-a-lifetime chance of catching

the rainbow serpent—would be sorely missed because of some rainbow snake cake.

Robert began to think of the story again, and how his father had warned him that the rainbow serpent would devour him. It comforted him. He had read stories—Aboriginal stories—of this type of stuff before. In fact, all countries and cultures had some sort of a story like this. A hero led by a dream—whether he was led to his doom or not, it all depended on the story's ending. He also wondered—was he that hero? Or the villain?

In the deep part of his mind, left over from his childhood, Robert knew that he would never be able to stop pursuing the snake. Devoured or not, he would have to find it. It was more important to him than his own life. He would hitch a ride on the airplane's wings, if he had to.

10
YELLOW SPOTTED LIZARD

Robert stood still, in hiding amidst a bush. He was staring at a yellow spotted lizard, the first of its kind—his very own first discovery.

Behind him, his father was guiding him, slowly explaining to him how to catch the reptile. "The key is the herding eye," he explained. "Remember that dog that our neighbours had?"

"Yeah," said Robert, focusing on the lizard intensely.

"Remember how it used to herd the town's sheep back in Newhaven? The sheep are scared of it, yes, but the key to controlling them—truly controlling them—is through the herding eye."

Robert carefully put his hand above the lizard. Any sign of movement could scare it away. It was his first catch—he couldn't afford losing it right away.

"Just look into the eyes of the lizard, Robert. Look into the eyes. Feel your power, and the power of it. Remember, always be the predator, not the prey."

Robert closed his eyes and thought of his heart, and then the lizard, and together, the connection between their souls. He felt the beating of his heart, slowing down to a standstill. He felt the beating of the heart of the Earth beneath his feet. Finally, he

felt a very small, but distinct, beating of the heart ahead of him. The heart of the lizard.

He opened his eyes and grabbed the lizard. It squirmed around, attempting to free itself from its capture. But as Robert stared into the lizard's eyes in an attempt to calm it, it did nothing—it had absolutely no effect.

Robert's father quickly grabbed the lizard and stared at it, intensely, for a few seconds. And then, the lizard calmed down. He offered it back to Robert. "Come on. Take a leap of faith, Robert."

Robert grabbed it back from him, this time, more concentrated than ever. Finally, the lizard seemed to calm under his gaze.

Robert cheered, lizard in hand. His father clapped. He had finally found it—his first discovery.

"That's just the beginning of the herding eye," his father said. "One day, I'll teach you more about it."

Later that night, at home, when his father had left for work long before, Robert put the lizard into a small glass tank among many other insects he had found before. But, out of all the insects and critters he had in that room, he had never found a lizard before—that was the first of many more discoveries to come, and that made him extremely proud.

As he observed the lizard, Robert jumped. The lizard had already used its long tongue to eat one of his captured ants. This scared him—didn't lizards eat grass?

Just then, the door downstairs opened. Robert's father had come home. He was briefly excited, but Robert could tell that something was wrong with him. And this time—there was someone else with him.

For a while, he heard loud footsteps walking around the kitchen, and faint conversation that eventually turned into loud arguing and yelling.

Soon after, he heard the footsteps of his father and his comrade running out of the front door, and his mother yelling something as he left. Eventually, both of the men seemingly left and the door slammed shut.

Robert went downstairs, to the other room, where his mother was crying. Robert went up to her. "Was that the rainbow serpent?" he asked.

She suddenly looked angered with him. "I don't want you to talk about the rainbow serpent with me anymore, alright? It's just a silly legend."

"But the town people told me it was real-"

"*Enough,* Robert. It's just a ploy for money. Now go to sleep."

Robert decided not to ask her where his father was. Instead, he went back to his room, where his collection of bugs and insects was growing ever larger. However, the glass tank had fallen off the shelf, and it was broken. His lizard—gone.

His mother didn't like insects. Robert gathered them all quickly and placed them in a spare cardboard box from his closet. The lizard, however, was nowhere to be found. He still wondered if lizards really did eat ants—or if it was just a mistake.

11
AIR SICKNESS

Eventually, Robert arrived at the local airport after encountering a lot of traffic, and even illegally bypassing other cars to save time at some point, only to realize that he was very much severely late and his flight had already been boarded.

He immediately ran towards his gate, seeing that there was still one flight attendant waiting there, just about to close it. Robert felt a deep desperation come upon him—that he would miss his own destiny, just because of some stupid cake. In the back of his mind, he prayed that he would make the flight. Maybe Allanby planned it that way—poison the cake, no competition.

Robert came up to the flight attendant closing the gate. This was his last chance to use his people skills that he claimed to have on his resume. She turned to him and seemed shocked. Robert was extremely sweaty and tired after almost twenty minutes of running, so much so that he could barely speak to her.

"Yes?" The flight attendant asked.

"Is this flight...816? Private...plane?" Robert was still panting. "I'm here. I'm a little late. I'm Dr. Forrest. Please—open the gate."

"I'm sorry, sir. We have already closed it. The plane will be taking off in a few minutes."

"No! *NO!*" The attendant backed off.

"Sorry," said Robert, as he calmed himself down with a series of deep breaths. He looked out the window, and saw that everyone was still outside, saying goodbye to their families. Even Allanby had someone—a brother, as it seemed.

"Look!" He pointed out the window. "Not boarding. They're all still outside."

"I'm very sorry, sir," she said. "Our private plane policy states that when we close the gates, there are no more passengers allowed in after."

"Please." As a last desperate attempt, Robert reached into his coat pocket and took out an ID badge from his university. It read: "PROFESSOR ROBERT FORREST—REPTILE HUNTER". Robert had put "Reptile Hunter" in himself, as a nod to his show. It had always made his fellow staff laugh.

"You know my show? Reptile Hunter? That's me. I was the host," Robert panted.

The flight attendant's lips began to curl into a polite smile. "Please. You can trust me. Please—I have to get on this plane. It's my destiny."

After a few moments of silence, the attendant said, "Fine. I'll open the gates for you. I just need your ticket." Robert reached into his back pocket. "But only because my daughter watches your show."

Suddenly, Robert's heart stopped. His ticket wasn't there.

He spun around—thank God. The ticket was on the floor—he had dropped it in his mad rush to get to the plane. He picked it up and gave it to the attendant, who scanned it and then opened the gate.

"Have a nice flight, reptile hunter."

"Thank you." Robert smiled. This was one of the perks of being a celebrity—even a retired one, at that.

As Robert headed for the plane and stepped outside, he saw that Dr. Allanby was the only one still outside, standing and talking with a man who looked like his brother—or maybe even father. The other man was a lot older than him.

As soon as Allanby saw Robert, he happily waved to him. Robert scanned his face for any sign of disappointment that he had somehow made it, but saw nothing.

"You made it, Robert!" yelled Allanby.

"Yep. At the last second," replied Robert.

"Like always."

"Like always."

Allanby presented his arms around the shoulders of his older lookalike standing next to him. "Robert, this is my brother, Earl Allanby. I didn't get a chance to tell you over the phone, but he just contacted me yesterday and he's coming with us."

"What?" Robert was surprised. He felt slightly angry at Allanby for such an amateur move of nepotism—bringing your own brother on a trip. That's like bringing your brother to work with you. Still, he tried to hide his disappointment. The man reached out his hand for a handshake.

"Pleased to meet you, Dr. Forrest." He seemed much older up close, and had a touch of grey hair. The man's clothing was rugged and very poorly kept while his hair seemed messy, unlike his brother Fred Allanby, who was always clean and relaxed. Fred Number Two's voice was very deep, too. He seemed generally gruff, like a mountain man.

Robert shook his hand. "You too." His hand was stiff and callous.

"So, what do you do?" Robert expected an answer of something along the lines of a miner or a lumberjack. Maybe Allanby never told Robert about his brother because he was embarrassed to be related to a working-class man. Or maybe—it was his adopted brother. But to Robert's surprise, Allanby's brother said, "I'm the owner of a box company."

"It's the same one that we keep our reptiles in, at our university stash," explained Allanby.

Robert smiled at Earl, and the group went up the ramp to the airplane.

The plane was refreshing from the third-class flights which Robert had taken many times over the course of most of his poorly funded expeditions. One of his last trips, before his TV show deal, of course, was inside an old, rusted up plane that he swore would break apart mid-air in the sky at any given moment.

This plane clearly didn't belong to the university. It was obviously funded by the investors for the trip. It looked, smelled, and felt like a rich senior's mansion estate.

Robert started to wonder how Allanby had even made so much money from the investors, considering that the snake was known to be a simple legend, less believable to most than the likes of Bigfoot or the Chupacabra. People laughed at Robert when *he* pursued the snake—even his own wife had. So why did these investors take Allanby so seriously, out of nowhere, for a few photos?

The plane was so fancy it was lined with golden rims on the inside and around the plane. The more

Robert observed it, the more nervous he felt being inside it. The team all sat separately, all of them relaxing on the heated seats, eyes closed. They were being spoiled.

As Robert scanned the plane for a place to sit, he noticed a well combed Asian man in a suit, looking out the window. He wore a distinctly shiny golden watch. The man turned to Robert and stared at him, saying nothing. He was one of the investors, for sure.

Robert finally decided to sit down next to Anna, who was the only one not completely entranced by the golden dazzle of the plane's interior. She smiled at him.

"So, I guess you decided to come on this crazy snake hunt after all?" she said.

"I got a little food poisoning from the cake," Robert explained.

"Good thing I didn't try it." They both laughed.

Robert reached into his pocket and felt for the necklace. Luckily, it was still there.

But as soon as he touched it, he felt that familiar feeling that arose from the cake night again. The sickness in his stomach. The blinding headaches.

Robert held it in. "Hey, Anna." Anna turned around. "Do you think that Allanby's been acting strangely lately? He came up to me on the party night and told me that the snake would only be his. I mean, he was, literally angry, eyes bursting, threatening me. He seemed very...out of character."

Anna laughed. "Robert. Allanby left before the party even started. He drove home to his brother's house to celebrate. I saw him go myself. That was some real bad cake, huh?"

Robert said nothing. Maybe the whole conversation with Allanby was imagined, just as the snake dream had been. He didn't want to think about it any longer.

"But yeah, I do see something wrong with Allanby," Anna continued. "He used to be really mellow, not really caring about expeditions and funding and all of that. Now, ever since we got all of that investor's money...I mean, all of this golden stuff, it's just insane. I don't trust it for one second. There is definitely something fishy going on here."

"What do you mean?" asked Robert.

"All I'm saying is that this isn't all just for a snake."

As the sick feeling in his stomach grew stronger, Robert decided not to reply to Anna's suspicions and he excused himself into the airplane washroom, ignoring the seatbelt sign which had now been lit.

Robert looked at his own reflection in the mirror—into his eyes. He seemed normal—his irises were just as usual. Nothing was wrong.

Suddenly, he began to hear the ringing in his ears again. His vision blurred and his headaches got stronger, as if someone was repeatedly knocking a hammer on his head. He anticipated passing out, but after only a brief flash of the rainbow serpent's beautiful golden eyes, everything returned back to normal. Robert's vision cleared, and he saw his same old self, nothing wrong at all.

Robert took out the rainbow-coloured bracelet from his right pocket and examined it. Just then, the airplane began to take off and Robert slammed against the wall, nearly dropping the bracelet inside the toilet. Luckily, he managed to catch it beforehand and placed it back into his pocket.

This would be a long flight.

12
ON SET

For the thousandth time, Robert Forrest arrived at the same set, in the same forest, in the same studio. His assistant greeted him with the usual black coffee with milk. He was only five minutes late this time, as opposed to his usual 10 minutes. The crew had already been waiting for him, equipment ready and packed, like they were loyal dogs.

As Robert entered the room, the crew stood silent waiting for his instruction. He had a commandeering presence—whether it was out of fear or out of respect, or maybe it was out of both at the same time, was hard to truly answer.

"Well? Did you find the snake?" asked Robert, directly to the whole crew.

They all stayed silent.

"Alright. How about this? I'm not going to film a single thing until someone finds that stupid snake."

Finally, a nervous man with a turtleneck sweater went up to Robert and faintly broke the news: "We couldn't find it."

"What? Are you kidding me?" Robert went over to the set, in front of the camera. He had no time to worry about his crew's incompetence before such a deadline for the show's new season premiere. "Well, make up some filler, then. Make some tracks in the

dirt." Robert put on his traditional hunter's clothes, cargo pants included.

"*Reptile Hunter,* Season 4, Episode 13 —Indiana Red Snake. Take one."

"Hello, I'm Robert Forrest and I'm the Reptile Hunter," Robert said in a monotonous voice. He forced out a smile.

"Here on the show, we've been known to find all kinds of snakes across the world. Well, now, we're gonna catch something else—the rare red rattlesnake. Alright, let's just get on with it."

Robert and the crew began to push forward into the makeshift forest. Robert slowly crawled under the grass and the bush, rubbing his finger on the dirt, as if he was a master tracker, looking for his prey like a caveman in the wild, in the ancient times. He could smell the alcohol in his own breath and sighed.

The crew, of course, was well aware of all of these issues—they had been for the past few seasons. Reptile Hunter had become a show made by the editors now—left to shift through dozens of hours of footage to make Robert look like a charming host. That is what made him look good for the public eye—the editing. But of course, you don't tell that to the fans.

Ahead of him, the crew was scrambling to create some tracks in the dirt. Robert stopped and pretended to look out, sniffing the air like a bloodhound, in order to give them some time.

Eventually, Robert went over and "found" the tracks. He took some of the dirt and tasted it with his tongue. "Alright. I believe that these are most definitely the tracks of the famed red rattlesnake. You can tell by the flavour, and frankly, my own years of experience." He smiled for the camera.

Behind him, one of the crew members raised the snake and gave him a thumbs up, which signified that they had found it. Robert put his head down and closed his eyes in thought.

"I can feel the snake here. I feel it."

The red rattlesnake slowly appeared into view. Robert stared at it, man and reptile, master and servant—a god and his subject. They each had their own respective sides, which was a sign of respect. Before the snake could strike, Robert quickly picked it up, disarming it from the initial fear it had, and let it calmly roll around his hands.

"As you can see here, I've got the snake calmly slithering around in my hands. It should take around twenty seconds before it starts to calm down." He began examining it. "Beautiful red scales...rattle at the end there was made for warning potential predators. This thing's venom was made for killing 'em."

He rubbed the snake's scales. Suddenly, the snake jumped and attacked his face—the whole crew gasped—luckily, Robert managed to halt it by its neck, with the snake's fangs just five inches away from his right cheek.

"Alright, I think it's time to place him down here..." he placed the snake down on the ground.

"And that's how you catch a snake."

"Cut!"

Robert let out a deep sigh and got up. "They should give that snake a damn paycheck for the acting. An Oscar too."

His cameraman, Cooper, came up to him. His only friend on set—a friend he had from the start. He was one of the few reasons that kept him going. "Yeah, for nearly killing you. That was a good take,

Robert, considering you're clearly drunk and lost interest in the show two seasons ago."

"Well, that's what happens when you watch people stage snake trapping for five years," said Robert.

"People still watch it. There are millions of fans, all 'cross the world."

"Well, I don't care. When I signed up for this show, I thought it was because of experience. I thought I would give them a real show, with real snake tracking experience. But no. Instead, I'm a puppet monkey who sits around and repeats lines while everyone else just does things for me."

Cooper didn't say anything. Robert stormed off. "We still need to film the ending scene!" yelled out Cooper. Robert ignored him.

Back at his trailer, Robert took out a pair of beers from the fridge. He unlocked the first one with a swipe of his hand—a sign of years of experience—and drank it whole in a matter of a few seconds.

For a moment, he silently sat on his bed, saying—or doing—absolutely nothing. He simply stared ahead...at a fish tank, where one of his favourite species of fish—the goldfish, was lying still and looking back on him.

It reminded him of something. It made him think of his own life in that very same moment. A deep thought bounced around in his mind, parallel to the goldfish in the tank—was he really just a puppet for other people? Forever stuck in a transparent prison, waiting to be fed crumbs of food? Dull entertainment?

Suddenly, someone opened the door. It was his fiancée, Claire. She came up to him, smiling. Her smile was so glowing and full of life that Robert

could not help but smile too. It immediately brightened the dull day.

But she knew that something was wrong with him. She had seen it in his face before, but it had never gone on to be so strong and so continuous until this day.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked.

Robert immediately caved in to her and collapsed in her arms. "I feel like a puppet. A corporate product."

"Well, that's what we agreed on when we signed up for this show. You, no, we, needed the money," she said. "Hey. I know that it's staged. It's boring. I get it. But do it for me. Do it for that one person out there who really believes it, and is inspired by it."

Robert said nothing for a moment. "I can't. I don't think I can do this anymore."

They both said nothing and simply stayed in each other's company. They were good at that. Robert stared at her ring finger, deep into the eyes of the red jewel. The way it sparkled against the lights of the inside of his trailer. The way it refracted light. The way it became a beacon in the dark.

Then, he had a striking idea.

"Wait. I just got something."

"What?"

"Remember when I told you about the rainbow serpent? And how I would find it one day? Well... what if we do not just one episode, but an entire season on it? One final season? Where I can do all the work myself?"

She chuckled. "That's crazy. You know the producers would never let you do that. Especially not Hank."

Robert thought back to the producer's eyes—that feeling that he was the true prey in that moment—not the predator. But he also felt something anew in himself—something that told him he had to pursue the serpent.

It was his destiny.

Robert got up. "I'm coming back to Australia," he said.

PART 2
DEERAGUN

13
DEERAGUN

On Friday, April the 19th, Dr. Robert Forrest and the members of the team arrived to the town of Deeragun in Queensland of Australia. They drove in from the airport in two brand new Jeeps through a barren desert road surrounded by forest. The sky had just settled into the perfect blue of the afternoon by then—Robert's favourite time of the day to enjoy looking at clouds in the sky.

Every few seconds, Robert heard the snapping of a camera, as Lester, the photographer of the team, could not let the beautiful scenery be uncaptured. After a while, the car was slowed down by his request.

"Look at that," said Lester, tapping Robert on the shoulder. There, out in the distant forest, was a beautiful lake surrounded by a large mountain like a half moon.

Robert was immediately reminded of the rainbow serpent story. He had already seen this place before, but never walked into it. A sign stood there that read in poor spelling:

"PRIVATE LAND
NO TRESPASIN!"

The team eventually reached Deeragun, only to see a very small town dotted with little cabins and surrounded by thick forest. It was much smaller than Robert had remembered it to be from his childhood—it almost reminded him of summer camp.

Right at the front, the so-called "leaders" of the town (it was still a democracy, not a dictatorship), greeted each of the team members individually—they introduced themselves as Jack Ranger and Tessa Archer, husband and wife, respectively.

Robert immediately felt nervous when it was his turn in the line to shake Jack's hand. It would not be very good if Jack had revealed to the team that he had seen Robert before.

As Jack shook Robert's hand, he quietly told him, "Fourth time's a charm, eh?" Robert nervously looked around to see if anyone was observing them, but sighed in relief as most of the team was off by then—however, Robert still felt a creeping presence around the area... somewhere.

Allanby didn't hesitate to ask about the snake's location, potential tracks, and even snake skin sheddings, of course. He was always eager to go for it. But Jack insisted that they would only tell them after a nice hot meal at the town hall, and took them along on a tour.

Just before they left, Robert noticed that there was a strange bald man with a scar on his forehead standing in one the back cabins, nearer to the forest, who seemed to be staring directly at him. Robert decide to ignore it for the time being—he didn't need the extra stress.

Along the way to the town hall, Robert and the team were introduced to the town, which was pretty

ordinary. The cabins, the sidewalks, the lamps on the street, and pretty much the whole aesthetic of the place screamed 1950s or something out of a Wes Anderson movie. It seemed perfect—almost too perfect to be true.

Even more so in tune to the strangeness, there were absolutely no insects, spiders, animals, or birds of any kind around. Not even any animal noise. It was as if it was some sort of a set, completely artificial. Darren, however, the team's trapper, seemed to be extremely nervous about Australian wildlife for someone that just signed up to go on an expedition there, and kept asking Robert about how many strange creatures he could expect in his cabin, and which of them could be venomous.

At the town hall dinner, the servings were small, similar to the town's own size, and were of typical Australian descent. But before they could eat and Darren had his mouth five inches from a chicken leg, Jack revealed his Christian beliefs and forced the entire team to say grace before their meals. It was a strange experience—none of the team members were religious, except for maybe Lester.

As soon as Robert took one of the pieces of beef and chowed down on it, someone sat next to him rather too closely. Robert feared that it was the creepy scarred man or maybe even the Asian investor guy who would try to show off his gold watch, and turned to his right. Luckily—it was only

his old friend, Cooper, who he had not seen since the show's end.

"Cooper!" exclaimed Robert. For once in this town, he was happy to see a normal, sane looking man he recognized.

"Hello, Robert," said Cooper. "How've you been these days?"

Immediately, what struck Robert the most is how deep Cooper's voice had become over the years. Had he taken up a smoking habit? Maybe a decade ages people longer than he had previously thought. Robert decided not to say anything about it. "So, I guess you heard about the trip."

"I helped organize it. Didn't you know? I live here now. My daughter was in that picture with the snake."

"That girl was yours?"

Cooper pointed behind Robert, and a little girl, most definitely the same one from the picture, turned to greet him.

"Her name is Mary," said Cooper.

Robert chuckled. "Huh. That's funny, isn't it. You help set up my staged show, and now I'm here with you fifteen years later practically doing the same thing."

"Yeah," said Cooper. "Final season, huh? Rainbow snake again?"

Roberts' breathing stopped for a moment. Cooper also paused, and quickly turned his attention to someone else.

Robert turned to Mary—it was time for him to do some investigating of his own. "Where did you see the snake, Mary?"

"I discovered it. I wanted to be like you when I grow up." She smiled.

"Mary, go play outside," said Cooper. He then took out a pack of cards and began to shuffle them around. He looked to Robert again.

"Wanna come over later and play some Texas hold 'em?"

"Sure," said Robert. He didn't want to mess up his chance to reconnect with his only true friend again. Besides, he seemed to be the key to Robert's own independent snake investigation—if he was going to find the snake before Allanby did, he would eventually just have to go rogue. And he just got a big advantage, or two, sitting next to him.

Just then, the lights went off and the room turned into darkness. There was complete silence, until the sounds of broken plates and glasses lit up a barrage of whispers. "Just a power outage, folks," said Jack. And with that, he opened the door to let in the light of the sun, and ended the dinner.

Dr. Allanby called the team to go outside with Mr. Archer, as they had finally decided to get on with the sighting. "It appears that Fred has finally convinced him to let us see the tracks," said Lester. The whole team laughed.

Before revealing the location of the snake, Jack began to talk about how the Lord would guide them, which clearly bothered Allanby. He seemed annoyed—frustrated, anxious to find the snake and as fast as he possibly could. The team laughed at Allanby, but he didn't seem to care. Robert was reminded of the anxieties that came from his past expeditions in that moment.

Jack's speech dragged on and on. Robert, no matter how hard he tried, could not bring himself to concentrate on the speech. He noticed something—or someone—out of the corner of his eye.

There, in the last cabin out near the bush, that old bald man with a large scar on his forehead was staring right at him.

As soon as Jack's speech was over, which felt like eons, Robert immediately ignored the rest of the team to come over and talk with the man. He had enough of bizarre bullshit.

"What do you want? Why have you been looking at me for the past couple of minutes?" He asked the man.

The man said nothing at first. Then, in a croaked whisper, he stated: "I live here."

The man motioned Robert to come with him on a walk. Robert noticed a sharp bulge coming from the man's pocket, meaning that he clearly had a knife. Was this scarred man just a crazed old hunter?

Robert looked back at his team, who didn't seem to miss him, as they were already being led away by the anxious Allanby. He decided to venture onwards with the scarred man.

At first, the man stayed silent, right up until they reached a small outdoor field area right after the edge of the forest. There was an old picnic table there, but it was clear it had not been used in years. The man stopped right before it, and they stood to face each other.

"As soon as I saw you, I knew you were special," explained the scarred man.

Robert didn't say anything at first. He had a bad feeling about this man. In the back of his mind, he felt the urge to just leave, and go back to the team.

But once again—curiosity kills the cat.

"What do you mean?"

"You have heard of the legends about this land, yes?"

"Something like that."

"Well, this land was feared by the Aborigines. They said that it was the resting place of the rainbow serpent. Heard of that, too?"

In fact, Robert had not heard of that. He always knew that the supposed rainbow serpent was based on real physical features, but not specifically based around Deeragun. It was just a coincidence that Deeragun shared so many features of the land—that is, in fact, why the town gained popularity in the early 1960s, especially for people looking to leave the big major cities and head for the smaller towns—thus, Little Sydney.

"This town is pretty unique. That's why we're here," said Robert. He decided not to tell the scarred man about 'Little Sydney'. He now had a strong suspicion that the man was looking to make some money off of him, or maybe just trying to find the serpent for himself.

The man suddenly froze, staring at Robert so intensely that he felt as if the look pierced his soul.

"What if I told you that the locals are misleading you all? That you will never find the serpent, and they don't want you to?"

Robert sighed. "I've been here before. Three times, in fact. If you're trying to trick me, or trying to get our money, just know that it isn't going to work."

"And when you visited here, what happened to the others with you?"

Robert suddenly remembered—that familiar scream, that sound of engines crashing—he shivered for a moment, and closed his eyes, then opened them, saying nothing in reply to the scarred man.

The man chuckled. "So, you see now. All of those times you have visited, people have died."

Finally, Robert got tired of the scarred man's games. "Look. Let me be honest. Ever since I heard about this trip, I've been getting strange... voices, and visions, in my head. And all of these strange coincidences have been happening to me."

As Robert said the final word in his sentence, thunder suddenly erupted, making him jump, and it began to rain. Robert did not even notice that dark clouds began to form in the sky throughout his entire conversation with the man—and it had only been a few minutes.

Strangely, the scarred man ignored the storm as if it was nothing. "And so the rainbow serpent has called you to return. This has happened before, to someone else."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter. Listen—there is a secret pathway to the west. They cover it up with signs. Right to the left from where you and your team arrived. It comes around a mountain, where there lie, at the peak, five caves. Cross one, the *right* one, and you will find the rainbow serpent. Eventually. I wish you luck, Robert."

The scarred man waved goodbye. The rain rapidly pummeled on Robert's head, soaking him, so he had no time to take in all of the information and prepared himself to return to the cabin.

Suddenly, he realized something.

Robert spun around. "Wait! How did you know my name!?"

Nothing. Nobody was there. It was as if the scarred man had disappeared completely off of the face of the Earth without a trace, nowhere to be seen. The scarred man walked into his life and walked out of it like a ghost in the mist—gone.

And just like that, the clouds cleared, and the rain slowed to a halt. Robert slowly raised his head up to the sky, where a light rainbow formed.

Robert ran back to the team.

14
LAWS OF NATURE

RRIIINNGGGGG.

The bell had rung. Outside, in the schoolyard, that moment which Robert dreaded throughout the entire day had come: the bell rang, which signified the start of recess. And just like clockwork, Mike and his gang of followers came up to Robert, who was sitting on the bench.

On his finger, Mike had a small red ant. He pushed it in front of Robert's face.

"You know what's coming. Eat it."

Without warning, Robert grabbed Mike's hand and pummelled it against his face, then kicked him to the ground.

By now, the entire school was watching them, and had encircled them as if it was the wrestling match of the century. They laughed as Mike quickly got up from the ground, frustrated.

Mike raised his fist at Robert.

Just as the sound of whistles exploded from the distance, Robert felt a hard hit to his right cheek and fell backwards onto the concrete. The students quickly scattered away along with Mike and his gang, and just like that, he was on the ground, alone.

After school, Robert didn't wait around to be called down to the office. He immediately got on his bike and rode back to his home.

As he neared his front porch, his father and mother greeted him by the door—a sign of comfort, a sign of safety.

But they were clearly shocked by the large bruise on his face. "I hate Newhaven," said Robert.

"What happened today, Robert?" asked his mother. Robert didn't reply. She turned to his father.

"I'm getting nervous about sending him to school down there. I told you, Newhaven isn't safe. Did you know that they smuggle drugs in boxes back there?"

"Oh, that's just a rumour. He just needs to stand up to himself. Every school has its bullies."

"You said it yourself. You saw smugglers by the docks. You told me, remember?"

"Let's not talk about this in front of Robert." His father went down to face Robert and put his hands on his shoulders.

"In this world, Robert, what are the two kinds of people?"

Robert thought for a moment. "Predator and prey."

"That's right. And you don't want to be the predator—the only way to survive is to be the predator. So stand up to that kid."

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Then just take a leap of faith that it will work. It's always a leap of faith."

The next day, at the same schoolyard, Robert saw Mike again—this time, he was alone, and this time, he had the upper hand. He was the hunter.

Robert edged closer towards him. He saw his face—that familiar face he feared all of those years for so long.

He had enough. Without warning, he came up to Mike, pushed him backwards, and started beating him against the pavement. The fight was small, but it seemed grand in scale. A group of teachers rushed in at once, having to pull the two apart as if they were magnets.

After that day, and all of the days after that, Robert never saw Mike's face again. He had now become the predator, and the prey had been scared off, or at least for those next couple of years.

15
TRACKING EXPERIENCE

Eventually, Robert made his way back to the team, who were luckily only just starting the hike up to the first location. He silently walked behind the team, hoping nobody would notice him, and enjoyed the sights of the pure, Australian wildlife.

Something in the air—or the feeling of it all—bothered him. He still never managed to bring himself to talk to Anna or anyone about it, and nobody else seemed to notice. There was no, well, life. Not even birds singing. Every once in a while, Robert would think that he heard the chirping of a bird, but it would just end up being Darren, who was in front of him carrying loads of snake traps.

Before he could casually invite himself back in to the team, Darren noticed Robert and turned around to greet him, getting the whole team's attention.

"A little late, eh?" said Allanby. "Where were you? I thought we need a *guide* for this expedition."

Robert said nothing. He had been revealed, fair and square. Instead, he continued on with the team.

After a while, they reached a small deserted area, where the sand began to mix in with the dirt. They then reached the middle of the supposed snake sighting, and were halted in their place by Jack Archer, where they soon found a small circular area made up of hard white rock.

There, right inside the rock, was a large print, matching the exact size and shape of the supposed rainbow snake.

"This is it?" said Allanby. "A rock carving?"

SNAP. Lester snapped a photo of it. Out of the whole team, only Lester seemed to not be disappointed by it, alongside Ben, who seemed completely fascinated by it. "This is amazing. It's one of those marks that the Aborigines used to talk about."

"What kind of marks?" asked Anna.

"Prints, in the sand or in stone, that guided them along their hunting trails. These were the basis for their legends and helped them make their way across Australia," explained Henry. "The basis for their song lines, too."

Henry placed his foot on top of the print, comparing their sizes.

"Amazing," he said. "Did you know that our Australian highway system was based on the Aborigine song lines?"

Robert came up to the print and placed his hand on it. Suddenly, he started to feel sick again. The voices were beginning to return—the whispers. Then, once more, he saw a brief flash of the same vision of the rainbow serpent, calling to him for a split second.

As he regained his sense of clarity, Anna walked over to him. "Robert, are you alright? Your nose is bleeding."

"I'm fine," replied Robert. "Adjusting to the arid temperature, that's all."

"Okay, so we have some ancient...prints. What does that have to do with finding our snake?" said Allanby, clearly annoyed. Out of all of the

expeditions that Robert had been on with Allanby, he had never seen him get as antsy as this before. This was—new.

SNAP. Lester snapped another photograph of the prints.

"All of the snake sightings have been in or around here," explained Jack. "This print must have been a resting place for an ancestor, perhaps."

Allanby sighed. "Well, do your job, people. Darren, set the traps."

"Robert's nose is bleeding, Fred," said Anna. Robert sat down on the stone.

"I don't care! We are finding something to justify 100,000 dollars of investment funding for this trip! Contribute to the team, Robert!"

SNAP. Allanby walked over to Lester and took away his camera. "We don't need photographs right now! Why did I even hire a photographer? Do some real work, people!"

The whole team began to walk around, digging through the dirt, pretending to do some work. Robert decided to follow the sand for potential tracks, even though his nose was pouring blood. Things were already too tense between him and Allanby to risk a confrontation.

In the background, Allanby began disputing with Jack over the correct location of the snake. Allanby kept demanding to see the exact place where the photographs of the tracks in the dirt were taken.

Soon after, Jack left the team and Allanby was left standing alone, observing the team, who each silently had their heads down trying to look for something—anything. After a while, Robert got desperate and clung to the bracelet in his pocket for luck.

Finally, someone yelled out, "Found something!" Robert spun around. It was Darren, who was frozen at the sight of a large spider a few inches away from him.

The whole team gasped, except Robert, who was relieved to see just one living thing in the town of Deeragun. Guess he was sane after all.

"God, Darren!" yelled Allanby, as he walked up to the spider. "I thought you actually found the snake!"

As Allanby motioned to kick the spider away, Anna yelled, "Stop! That's poisonous!" Allanby stopped for a moment, and then took a step back. Darren remained frozen right next to the spider.

For the next five minutes, the entire team stood still, waiting for the giant spider to do something. Any single move, and the spider could go on a rampage and kill them all—well, at least that was the misconception. Robert was frustrated—he wanted to just take the spider and kick it away, but he was feeling more and more sick by the minute.

Eventually, Lester carefully walked up near Darren and whispered, "Dude. Just back away slowly." Just then, the spider jittered a bit and the whole team yelled with it. Then, the spider scurried away into the forest.

Darren let out a loud sigh of relief. "I'm never coming back here again."

"Well, keep looking for the snake!" yelled Allanby.

Lester approached Allanby angrily. "You're not helping just by standing there." Allanby gently pushed him, but Lester stood his ground. "Face it, Fred. There are no snakes to be found here."

"I can have you off the team in a second. Do you want that for your career, Lester? Huh? You want your Nat Geo internships gone?"

Suddenly, after pretending to look for tracks down in the dirt for over ten minutes, Robert spotted actual snake tracks under the grass.

But something inside him decided not to tell Allanby. He let go of the bracelet and returned it to his pocket.

"He's right. It's not here. I can feel it," said Robert.

"Oh, can you? Really? Or maybe you just hired your crew back there to hide the snake for us? Wait until the last second until you catch it? I don't think so, Robert."

Just before things could get too heated, Robert felt a massive, throbbing headache and collapsed on the ground. His nose bled again.

"Guess Robert's too sick to join us. Anna, escort him out of here, please."

Robert ignored Allanby—ignored the whole team—and bolted towards the woods, following the snake tracks. He knew it—this was the rainbow serpent. He felt a strange sense of connection—as if the snake was calling out to him, and he had to return its call and *find it*, no matter what. It was as if they were both bound to each other by an infinite rope of destiny spread out across every corner of the universe, and finding each other was but a survival instinct—a basic human need.

And then—Robert collapsed. The whispers stopped whispering. His vision cleared. Robert found himself in the middle of the woods, lost, and completely alone. He could not account for the last couple of minutes. It was as if he had just come out of a hypnotic trance.

In front of him, there was a line of black ash of some kind, extending from the left and to the right all the way towards the horizon of the endless

forest. The tracks ended straight on the line, as if they were cut off by it.

Robert reached into his right pocket and took out the bracelet. He was about to grab on to it, but then realized something else.

He took it with him on every trip to Australia. And ever since he took the bracelet, only then did he start to get the visions, and the voices.

It was a vehicle—one of fear, and coincidence. That's why that spider came. That's why they all died. That's why there were no birds.

Robert desperately dug a hole in the dirt with his bare hands, faster and faster, deeper and deeper, until his nails cracked and bled and were lined with dirt. Once the hole was deep enough, he put the bracelet inside and covered it up again. His mind cleared immediately, and he felt safe. Everything felt—clear.

The peace did not last long before Robert's hair stood on the back of his neck. Someone was watching him. He turned around, only to see an old darker skinned man with long white hair pointing a gun at him.

The stress of it all was too much. The calling. The bracelet. The man with the gun. Mysterious old men and rain and thunder storms. Robert fainted. It all turned to black.

After a few minutes, Robert woke up to the face of Dr. Allanby's brother, Earl, who spoke the only words he had heard him since the expedition first began: "Are you okay, Robert?"

Together, they returned back to the spot of the first sighting. Allanby was still there, seeming less angry and irritated, and more genuinely nervous for Robert. For the first time since the plane ride,

Robert actually saw that expression of true friendship in Allanby's face.

Maybe he was right. Maybe the root of all of his problems really was the psychological effects of the bracelet.

The team eventually went to the town, slightly disappointed, but not before seeing Robert off to a hospital to treat his nose bleeds. Robert was deemed mentally fit and physically healthy by the town's doctor, and he was sent home with the rest of the team in their cabin.

Robert once again checked his pockets for the bracelet, just to make sure...and found nothing. He was sure—sure now than ever before that the visions wouldn't bother him again.

When Robert arrived to the scheduled team meeting in the evening, he noticed that Allanby was outside the cabin with his brother, arguing about something. He decided not to say anything, even when his brother stormed off before the meeting had even begun.

During the evening meeting, Robert blocked out the group's chatter. He had a strange feeling that something about what the scarred man had said was right. Maybe they really were being led on a wild goose chase. Maybe the small pathway on the western side really was the correct way to the rainbow serpent. After all, they had still found no real evidence to justify their expedition. Allanby, out of all of them, looked like he didn't trust

anything of what Jack and the town had claimed to see at all.

And neither did Robert.

Robert excused himself from the meeting, deciding to confront the bald man with the scar on his forehead once and for all. Just before he left, Allanby gave him a look—as if they both knew that the expedition was a sham. The town was surely hiding something.

It was already dusk, and few people were outside. Robert reached into his pocket and took out the journal, and begin to examine the first few pages.

Suddenly, something leapt out at him—previously unknown to him but now obvious. On the very first page of the journal, there was a small line dividing the page with squiggly lines.

His father had known about the ash line. He had written it down.

This shocked Robert. The journal was over 25 years old, and the fact that nothing changed since then was deeply alarming. He desperately tried to analyze the other drawings written in the book—but it was pointless. It just seemed like gibberish to him.

Robert put away the journal. As he walked up to the cabin which the man with the scar on his face first exited out of, he noticed that the door was already open. Robert was quickly greeted by a deep and foul stench. Inside, the entire house was covered in dust and dirt, and paint was peeling off the walls.

A small bed was the only furniture in the room, and it had cockroaches coming underneath it left and right. Even worse, a dead rodent of some kind lay right in the middle of the whole thing.

It was clear, that based on the entire cabin, nobody had lived there for years. The mysterious man with the scar on his face seemed to have lied to him.

Robert had enough—he would put an end to the mystery once and for all, tonight. He immediately ran over to Jack Archer's cabin, which was near the centre of the east side of the town. He slammed on the door.

"Anybody home? Open up, Jack!"

Soon after, an older, darker skinned man man with long, grey hair opened the door. The same one who Robert thought he saw point a gun at him in the woods. It was clear that he was either not related to Jack or a very distant relative.

"What do you want?" the man asked him, in a thick, Australian accent.

"Where is the leader, Jack Archer?" Robert asked.

"Sleeping. I'm his grandfather. My name is Ajay," he replied. "Are you on the expedition team?"

"Yes. Why?"

"No reason. Why have you come here?"

Robert hesitated for a moment, but decided to ask anyways. "Is there a bald man with a scar who lives here?"

Ajay pointed to the abandoned cabin. "Yes. He lived there. But he is dead now."

The reply hit Robert like a rock to his heart. He paused for a moment, and considered leaving right there and then. Leaving the whole expedition. He was only a few months away from retirement—maybe this wasn't worth breaking his sanity.

But still, something deep inside of him ignored it and kept going. Robert had a deep sense that this man knew something that he didn't. He had to get some answers out of him.

"Is it true that there's something strange about this place?"

Ajay looked at Robert and studied him, staring deep into his eyes, like the scarred man had. Seemingly satisfied with what he saw, he decided to answer.

"There are many legends about this place."

"What legends?"

"Some say that men get called by the bush. The outback. They see things. And then the great serpent devours them, and they are never to be seen again."

"So there is a serpent?"

Ajay said nothing for a moment. "The men always looking for something. Gold. A serpent. They all die in the end."

"They die because you shoot them?", asked Robert.

"This is the land only for the initiated men..." he looked into Robert's eyes. "Just leave. You and your team of researchers. I cannot help you."

"I am not a researcher. I know the story of the rainbow serpent. My father told it to me as a child." He reached into his pocket for the bracelet, only to remember that he had thrown it away. He regretted that move.

"Look. That man with the scar told me that I was special. That he would guide me. And, well, I've been getting these visions lately. I've heard voices. I really think that there's something going on here. For me to find."

Ajay suddenly changed his face from cold to warm, sensing Robert's desperation.

"Tell me, what is the rainbow serpent's name, in the story of your father?"

"Goorialla."

Ajay went inside the house and rummaged through his drawers. Robert noticed that the house was filled with strange artifacts, and paintings of the rainbow serpent were scattered across the walls.

Finally, Ajay returned with a small, blue coloured stone. "This will protect you. But I warn you, do not go if you must not need to."

Robert put the stone in his back pocket. "Is it true that you're misleading us on purpose? Leading us on that wild goose chase yesterday?"

The man said nothing and slammed the door.

16
THE CEREMONY

Bullets of thunder and rain pummeled against the windshield. Robert struggled to drive. He could barely see, and relied purely on chance that he would hit a car and die right before their perfect day.

Next to him, Claire grabbed his hand. They didn't say anything, do anything, except to relish in each other's comfort.

"Maybe we shouldn't go to Omaha," Claire said. "There's no way that this storm will clear up before the wedding. It's a bad omen."

Robert didn't reply. He didn't want to think of anything else but getting home safely.

By the time they had reached home, nearly crashing into a few cars and only being saved at the last minute by bright headlights, Claire decided to postpone the wedding, and this time, have it in a large tent—transparent, of course.

And then—just like that—the wedding happened. A moment so important that seemed to pass in a matter of minutes. Friends, family, jugglers and priests came and went—taking half of their savings with them.

After what felt like no time at all, Robert was standing at the front of the reception, dressed and

well suited, waiting for Claire to come out in her white dress.

The song played. Their wedding song—the same you hear in the movies. It was all perfect. Robert looked at his mother, and thought about her grey hair, and wondered how Claire would look in twenty years. It was a huge commitment, indeed. He was nervous. He tried to look at the other people who had arrived, in an attempt to calm himself down. On Claire's side, he recognized almost nobody—they all seemed very tough, and rude. Or maybe it was just his own nervousness looking back at him.

Suddenly, Robert's phone rang in his pocket. The eyes of the audience turned from happiness and joy into hatred and annoyance—at him.

It was his greatest nightmare. To make matters worse, Claire was already there, her head peeking out of the side of the door.

Cooper shoved Robert. Finally, he decided to quickly check his phone. It was Hartman—his show's producer. Robert sighed and answered it, only to hear that same, familiar, croaked and smoked up voice say—"Robert, we need you back on set. Gotta talk about the new idea you had."

Before Robert had a chance to reply, he saw what he could only describe as an angel embodying his own wife. Without a second thought, he raised his phone and threw it to the back of him, into oblivion. The audience clapped—perhaps both at Robert's phone demonstration and at Claire's beautiful dress.

It was, indeed, the most beautiful dress he had ever seen. No wonder she spent so much time picking it out. It had to be a custom for sure. And it was well worth the price tag.

Unlike the rest of the night, the time from which she walked up to the podium was a complete dream—it felt like it lasted hours. And before he knew it, time rushed up again and Robert was holding her hands as they said their vows.

"I promise to guard you—and to hold you—and to..." Robert paused. He forgot his vows.

The room awkwardly stayed quiet. Robert was so entranced in Claire's eyes that he didn't care. The priest continued with the ceremonial "You may now..."

"Oh, screw it." Robert, interrupting the priest, finished the wedding and kissed Claire.

Everyone cheered. Robert could think of nothing but her for a moment, which had never happened to him before. He always thought of his work. But this time, this night, he didn't.

Just then, it became to rain. Claire laughed. "I don't think we officially got married, if you interrupted him."

"Oh, we got married," said Robert.

The rest of the night was a daze. instead of nervous sitting and standing around, Robert was completely clear and focused on Claire, almost like a strange hyper-focused dream.

Cooper, who was Robert's best man, got up to make a speech, which Robert anticipated the most for the many jokes he would be likely to tell.

"As Robert's cameraman, well, you don't wanna know what happens behind the scenes," said Cooper. Everyone laughed. Cooper turned to Robert, and audibly whispered, "You may be in big trouble for throwing away your phone."

"It was worth it," said Robert. With that, everyone in the room smiled.

Robert zoned out for the rest of the speech, and instead, a familiar urge came back to him. He suddenly lost that feeling of serenity, and it was replaced with a new, more important mission to accomplish.

As soon as Cooper ended his speech, Robert stood up and ran over to get his phone back. His mother came up to him, saying, "I'm so proud of you." Robert thanked her and almost pushed her out of the way, desperately moving forward.

"Where are you going?" yelled Claire.

"I forgot—something," replied back Robert. He tried to run off, but Claire got up and stopped him like a hammer.

Robert gulped. "I know you want to see to your work. I know. But you promised—you promised not to hunt for that stupid snake when we got together. Just come with me and ignore it. What could possibly happen in one night, Robert, after all of it?"

Claire smiled. Robert suddenly felt that deep feeling of serenity return to him, and sat back down with Claire. He put his worries into the back of his mind for the night.

Later that night, Cooper handed Robert his phone back just as he and Claire were preparing to go off on their honeymoon.

Robert quickly checked his messages in the car, while Claire was still off talking with her friends.

"First message. *BEEEEEP*."

Robert gulped. He knew he would be in trouble if it was the producer. But interestingly enough, it seemed to be someone else—a new voice—a cleaner voice.

"Robert, please call me back if you get the chance. There's been an accident. Hank Hartman is dead—BEEEEEP."

After the honeymoon had been cancelled, Robert took the car and drove all the way back to the 'RED SUN STUDIOS' office in central Omaha, where the set was a complete disaster.

It had already been a few hours, but wires were still everywhere, bolts of electricity flew out left and right, and half of everything was on fire. Assistants, producers, and crew alike were running around like wild animals.

Someone came up behind Robert and tapped him on the shoulder. "What happened while I was gone?" asked Robert.

"What happened?" This man was clearly new, and young, with blonde hair but a seemingly arrogant attitude. "You and Cooper weren't here. We had to hire new cameraman. You didn't bother to tell us about the fire effects you set up, and now three people are dead."

Robert nearly collapsed in shock. "What are you talking about? What fire set? Cooper set that up, not me."

"Well, whoever set that up is in big trouble." The man handed Robert his badge, which was a clear producer's ID. "I'm the backup producer for the studio. Hank is dead, along with two assistants."

Behind the producer, two police officers approached Robert.

"Officers," the producer said. "Forrest claims that one of our cameramen set up the whole thing, and he had nothing to do with it."

The officers looked at Robert. "Do you want us to arrest him?"

Robert paused for a moment. He briefly considered if Cooper had sabotaged the show somehow, after he wasn't given the promotion by Hank. Then, his mind cleared. There was no way Cooper would ever try something like that. This was... something else.

"No!" said Robert. "No. It was my idea. I remember now. We were—we were trying to create the opening for the new season."

The officers grabbed Robert and took him to the police car. "What am I supposed to do now?" yelled Robert. "I just got married! I promised her I would come back after this was settled!"

The producer shook his shoulders. "Guess the show is cancelled, for now. Good luck back there."

Suddenly, something deep rung inside Robert. His body froze—it was no longer his own. It was taken over by his deep, animalistic instinct to survive.

He breezed past the cops, running over to the producer. "Wait! Don't take me in yet! I have an idea."

"What—you wanna make Cooper the scapegoat?"

"No—look. We can cover this up. But the show isn't over yet. It can't be. I was pitching an idea to Hank, before he died. It was an idea for the new upcoming season. I don't think Cooper did this—I think other people are out for this idea."

"What do you mean?" the producer laughed at him. "Who cares about some idea for a TV show? We spit

those out in L.A like nothing. What, did you find a golden goose egg in the sky?"

"Something like that. A rainbow snake. The Australian legend. I think we tracked it down to Queensland."

The producer said nothing. Finally, he signaled for the officers to stop. "So you think this will somehow revive the show? After this terrible accident?"

"Not only the show, but it could change the world. Science as we know it. And I have the proof for it. Just please, let us go after it. One final season."

The producer observed Robert for a moment, saying nothing. This was an old trick—building tension. But Robert looked into his eyes, and already knew that the idea was his—the show had been returned to him. He was now the predator, and they had become the prey.

"I'll do it..." he finally said, "but only if you make Cooper the scapegoat."

"You mean by firing him?"

"We're losing a lot of money over this already, Robert. It's either we fire him, or we fire you. And you said it yourself, this idea is important."

Robert thought about the offer for a moment. Then, he shook his hand, accepting it.

17
THE BRITISH TEAM

"All in."

Robert placed all of his chips on the table. Cooper laughed. "No way. I don't believe you for a second." Robert attempted to hold his poker face as Cooper tried to analyze him before making his move.

Finally, Cooper said, "All in."

They revealed their cards—Robert lost. Cooper laughed. "See, I told you. I'm the best—been playing for years. You haven't seen how good I've become."

Robert began to shuffle the deck. "So, Cooper, what happened to you, after the show, I mean?"

"What happened? What do you mean, you left the whole crew without telling us! You just cancelled the show single-handedly! While we were filming the fifth season!"

"Yeah. I'm sorry about that."

"Well, I don't hold a grudge. But after you left, we didn't get our paychecks. After that whole controversy thing. We only got payed for the first episode. Well, *they* did. They blamed me for all of it and...so much hard work and—it was all for nothing. And, you know..."

Robert briefly thought about telling Cooper the truth. But he decided not to. "I depended on that money. And when I didn't get it, things turned real bad for me, Robert."

He didn't say anything more. Robert didn't need to know. It was clear from the way that Cooper shuffled the deck like an obsessive madman, like his life depended on it, the fact that he lived in this town, and his wife was ever-presently missing, what had happened to him after the show's end.

"Dad!" Suddenly, a voice erupted from the room next door. Out ran Mary, Cooper's daughter, who seemed to be in distress.

"There's a spider in my room!"

"Oh, really? Well, Robert can take care of it. He owes me."

Robert sighed and went into the room. Right on the side of the wall, there was a small black spider—bigger than usual by America's standards, but small for Australian ones. Robert let it crawl unto his hand and walked back to Cooper.

The girl screamed. "Calm down," said Robert. "Look." The spider began to crawl up his arm until it reached his hand and went back down again.

"See? Nothing to fear," said Robert. He let the spider down to the table. "The key is to look it in the eye, and face it. It's the herding eye."

"Will you teach me the herding eye one day?"

Robert turned to Cooper. He shrugged his shoulders, as if he had no idea what the herding eye was. In reality, of course, Robert had been obsessed with the idea, pitching it as a catchphrase for the show multiple times, but never quite getting it in directly. Cooper did manage to show it in action well, however, with his camera work.

"You told me that you want to be like me," said Robert, facing Mary again. "Well, you're off to a good start, with that rainbow snake. Consider this your second discovery."

She touched the spider and it crawled on the palm of her hand.

Suddenly, she burst into tears. "I faked the rainbow snake," she said. "Me and my friend Mackenzie painted it with dad's tools."

"Woah, woah. Calm down. You don't know what you're talking about." Cooper grabbed the spider. "She's just scared of spiders, ignore her."

For Robert, however, this statement deeply scared him. He nearly collapsed on the floor. Now it had all made sense. Why the town would go through such trouble organizing an expedition. The investors. If the snake wasn't real, he now knew why.

Though that still didn't explain the snake tracks he found under the grass.

After a long walk to let his thoughts swim and gather, Robert eventually made his way back to his cabin. He examined his journal again, and this time checked the map, looking for something—anything—to confirm that his father wasn't a liar.

After the drawing of the ash line, another line led to five coloured markings similar to the beads on the bracelet. It was still too confusing to understand—it was pointless. It was like trying to read Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Robert's eye caught some new arrivals in the cabin nearby. He sneakily put the journal away. There was a campfire outside the neighbour's cabin to Allanby's cabin, where a group of men sat next to

two parked black Jeeps. On the Jeeps, there was a logo that read: "POWELL." Where had Robert heard that name before? He swore that he had remembered it from somewhere—a fuzzy memory from long ago.

Each of the men carried a bottle of alcohol with them. The oldest of them all had a noticeable brown and very large mustache, and was loudly laughing and joking around. It was clear by their manner and appearance that they were British.

The man turned to face Robert, who was staring at them for much too long. Before Robert could leave, the man walked up to him and shook his hand.

"I'm Nigel. Big fan of your work."

"Thanks. I'm Robert Forrest."

He smiled. His accent was thick. "I'd like to talk to you about a proposition. That team of yours—well, let's just say that we've found what you guys would take months to find."

"What do you mean?"

Nigel tapped Robert's pocket, where the journal was.

"You clearly have something we need. We have, well, let's just say an incentive. How about you join our team instead?"

Robert said nothing. If this man knew about the journal, somehow, then he was very dangerous. He had no time to converse with him—he had to figure out a plan to distance himself from them .

"No thanks." Nigel seemed disappointed and returned back to his drunken quarrels.

With that, Robert left to his cabin. He knocked on the door. It took a while before Lester opened it. Half of the crew was already in bed. Allanby was

on the phone, and hung up the call just as Robert arrived.

"I think they're staging it. Jack still hasn't given us any evidence. For all we know, this is a ploy for money," explained Allanby.

Robert sat down on his bottom bunk, underneath Darren.

"And where were you, Robert?"

"Out with an old friend."

"You mean Ajay? Yeah, Jack told me that you came by his house before our first expedition. Right. Tomorrow, we'll speak with Jack again. He'll give us the last location. We'll have to find something. And Robert, if you're late again tomorrow for any reason, you're out."

Allanby turned off the lights. On top of him, Darren peaked his head down and whispered, "All clear?"

"All clear, nothing here," replied Robert. But the truth was, he hadn't really looked.

He placed down the journal under his bed. Robert soon found that he couldn't sleep. He was always like that—he needed to know exactly what to do before he did it. But right now, he was too overwhelmed to even attempt to answer just one question that he had about the strange new Deeragun he had been sent into.

Even after what seemed like hours, and Darren was long snoring, Robert kept thinking about the rainbow snake being painted. Being a ploy. Ajay's warning to stay away. Cooper.

Suddenly, a horn honked. Robert heard the sound of Jeep engines running and taking off near the cabin. Was this just a dream?

Robert looked out the window—no, it was the British team. They were heading off somewhere.

Since he couldn't sleep anyways, Robert decided to investigate. He quietly, very slowly creaked open the door, and stepped outside. Allanby was a very light sleeper, as Robert had learned the hard way years ago.

Shockingly, Robert saw the British men standing with Allanby's brother, Earl. He ducked behind the cabin wall.

Just as the last Jeep was about to go, a few members of the British team loaded some supplies, clearly related to construction, in the back of the Jeep and then got in the front seats. Without thinking, Robert hopped inside the back of the Jeep unnoticed, and the engine roared as it drove, going to an unknown place.

Robert was in trouble.

18
A SECRET PLACE

Robert's father slowly lead Robert forward, who had a blindfold on. Soon, the sensation of hard grass and sticks on his shoes turned into sand shifting around him.

In the back of his mind, Robert briefly thought that it could be quicksand and panicked, but his father's hand calmed him down.

"Just a few more minutes." To Robert, each step was madness. He felt like he could step on something venomous at any moment, or fall into a pool of water, or even off a cliff. He desperately wanted to take off his blindfold and just see what his father was about to show him.

Finally, his father stopped, and without saying anything, lifted the blindfold with the help of Robert's own desperate hand.

Expecting a grand statue or a magical genie of some kind, Robert was disappointed. What he saw was a small town—not even a town, but a collection of wooden cabins—in the middle of what seemed to be the endless desert.

His father said nothing. Whenever he did this, it meant that Robert didn't see enough yet. He looked around the town, hoping for something spectacular, only to see something in the sand—something gleaming.

He grabbed a chunk of the sand. As it eroded away, he noticed that there was what seemed to be like thousands of small, rainbow-tinted chunks of rock.

He showed it to his father.

"That, Robert, is opal. It's a precious and very rare rock that everyone in the world wants."

The father pointed to the town. A few people were walking around, waving to him. Robert noticed that they seemed to have a peaceful aroma to them—a sort of energy that he didn't see back at Deeragun.

"That is why this is the secret place. Nobody else must know about it, not even your own mother. And especially not anyone from Newhaven."

"Can I tell my friends?" Robert asked.

"No. You can't. Nobody can ever find out about it. The only reason we're allowed to stay here is because the Aborigines let us."

Robert picked up more pieces of the sand, and found a large piece of the opal. He mirrored it along the light of the sun, where its rainbow complexity shone even brighter and more extravagantly than before. It mesmerized him.

"One day, I'll show you the way here. Maybe one day people will learn to accept this place without stealing from it."

He grabbed the opal from Robert's hands. "But for now, I just wanted you to know about this place. Don't try to come here. Or else the serpent will find you."

"What do you mean?"

His father laughed. "Ah, don't worry about it. I was just joking. It's just a legend. But do you want to know another secret, Robert?"

"Yes."

He took out a piece of paper—a map—from his pocket, with incomprehensible scribblings on it. "I think I know where he is."

Without another word, his father put the blindfold back on, and they returned home.

Robert would soon forget all about the secret land filled with opal, but one memory—or smell—did stick to his mind for a long time from the secret place. The smell of fire—molten, burning, raw fire.

19
HITCHING A RIDE

After half an hour of driving passed by, Robert felt like passing out from being so close to the exhaust of the Jeep and smelling its dirty air. To distract himself, he examined the various tools in the back of the Jeep.

There were multiple shovels, pickaxes, and a lot of rope, as well as a few extra helmets—well, that's what he felt in his hands, anyways, as he could scarcely see under the moonlight.

Eventually, the Jeep came to a steep halt. Robert soon realized that maybe, hiding out in the back of the Jeep was a bad idea, as he heard footsteps approaching him. Luckily, they simply circled the car and left, allowing Robert to slip out to a bush nearby.

What he next saw amazed him. A small dirt trail ended with a giant mountain, so steep that Robert could not see the top of it. It was beautifully lit by multiple torches and flashlights, with dozens of men digging around and drilling.

Allanby's brother Earl was there, right at the front of the mountain. He seemed to be conversing with the British team's leader—Nigel, as he introduced himself previously.

So this is what they were hiding.

Robert decided to take a bold risk. He grabbed one of the helmets and put them on. Quickly and quietly, he scurried past Allanby's brother, posing as a simple worker.

Suddenly, Earl yelled, "Stop!". The noise of the men halted, and Robert froze.

Earl went up to the front of the mountain, where the trail began to lead on a wooden spiral staircase upwards. He walked right past Robert, which made him breath a sigh of relief.

On the cave wall, there was an ancient drawing depicting the rainbow serpent and a few stick figures dancing around it. Below that, there were a few rocks. Earl grabbed one and cracked it, then sighed in frustration. The work continued.

As Earl headed back to the Jeeps, he bumped into Robert. "Watch it," he said. Robert moved along.

Soon, he reached the large, granite-like mountain. It was extremely steep, with a pathway leading all the way to the top. Men of all ages were mining it down and taking it apart, collapsing the walls as if it were paper.

The drawings which were apparently made by the Aborigines were what interested Robert the most. They depicted a rainbow serpent—one very large in size.

As he touched the drawing, he felt a deep sense of fear boil inside of him.

"Get back to work!" yelled Allanby's brother. Robert didn't know if this was directed at him, but he ran up to the middle of the mountain regardless, exploring the area. Nearing the top, he tried to look out past the mountain, but couldn't see anything else. It was as if something was blurring his way.

All he saw was a faint desert—but it was blurry like a mirage.

He noticed that the men were using all kinds of equipment—strange new technology that he had never seen before, too. Some of it was distinctly familiar to him, as it almost seemed like the same type of equipment his own crew had used to track snakes on the show. But this kind of it was different, more advanced.

Suddenly, someone came up next to him. Out of the corner of his eye, Robert noticed that this person had a gun—he gulped.

"Eh, haven't I seen you before?" the man spoke in a British accent.

He was clearly on the British team. Probably one of the men who Robert had seen back at the camp, only some time ago.

"Nope." Robert did a fast walk back to the two Jeeps, which were luckily just starting up. In fact, Allanby's brother was already in the car and it was moving.

There was no way he would be able to walk the path at night. He needed to get on one of those Jeeps.

Robert darted towards the car. What was the fastest speed that a man could run again? 3o miles an hour? Robert prayed that Earl didn't look out the side of the car window. Luckily, just before anyone could spot him, and just as he heard the sounds of yelling behind him, he jumped on the back of the Jeep fairly safely.

He could faintly hear the conversations between Allanby's brother and one of the British men—he couldn't hear all of it, but he could faintly make out one sentence "We'll find Robert tomorrow."

Robert. That was his name. Perhaps it was a coincidence—after all, it was a common name in Britain. But in the back of his mind, Robert knew that they were talking about himself.

He would have a lot to explain tomorrow.

20
GOING ROGUE

Robert woke up from his bed that morning with an idea. An idea planted in his mind from the previous night, with the cave drawings and the messages on the wall. All of the equipment and the money and the digging. An idea springing from the fact that their entire trip could have been built on a lie.

It was only half past five. Luckily, Robert had managed to return home quickly after the spying trip, and as he had developed a habit of waking up earlier before anyone else, he had time to figure something out for himself while everyone was still asleep.

Robert ran over to Cooper's cabin and banged on the door. A few seconds later, a tired and seemingly drunk Cooper, who could barely open his own eyes, opened the door.

"Jesus, Robert. It's not even the morning yet. Go to sleep."

Robert let himself in and began to look through Cooper's bookshelf. "Do you have any books on the rainbow serpent?"

"What?" All Robert could see were a few books on parenting and poker video guides. There was even a movie—Mad Max—but not what he was looking for.

"The rainbow serpent. The Australian Aboriginal legend. You have anything on that?"

Cooper back collapsed on the bed.

"Yeah. It's in my daughter's room. Go to sleep, Robert. Please."

Quietly, Robert opened the door to Mary's room and flipped on the light. A small grey book titled "Australian Aborigines and Their Legends" was wrapped by her hands, with her sleeping on her back.

Robert carefully took the book out of Mary's hands. Then, he walked out and placed the book back down on the poker table, frantically flipping through the pages for something—anything.

And then—he found it. "*The Rainbow Serpent*," read Robert. "*An Australian myth, known to be over 50,000 years old.*"

He frantically skimmed through the pages until he got to the origin story. "*Goorialla made two more mountains, one of the Naradunga was long and made of granite, the other had sharp peaks and five caves and it was called Minalinha.*"

This was it. This was what he was looking for. Robert knew that he remembered that mountain—and the peaks, and the fact that the rainbow serpent was written all over the town's geography. Of course—there were five peaks on that mountain, just as his father's journal had five beads drawn on it.

"Did you find what you were looking for, Robert?" asked Cooper.

Robert closed the book. "We were looking in the wrong place. They *were* misleading us." He walked up to Cooper, who could still barely open his eyes.

"Cooper, your daughter painted the snake. Maybe not, but let's say she did. Let's say this whole thing was invented, photoshopped. Why?"

"What?" Cooper asked.

"Just listen to me. You know I've lived in this town before. This used to be a paradise, a utopia. People came here from across the world. They called it Little Sydney. I come back here years later, and it's a dump."

Robert sat down on the bed. "So of course they would do this. But they were smart about it. They had real sightings and real locations but they also misled us, so we paid them but we didn't get too close to their secret treasure—the secret place."

"What are you talking about, Robert?"

"I know where the rainbow snake is. Their secret treasure, what made them so successful in the first place. I found it. Well, some other people might have found it first, but the point is, I know where it is now. And I'm going to find it myself."

Robert began making his way out of the door.

Just before he left, Cooper yelled out, "Where are you going!?"

"I'm going rogue," replied Robert.

As Robert made his way back to his cabin, he noticed that the two Jeeps parked in the British team's cabin were already gone. He was running out of time. Whatever they were looking for, Robert would have to find it first. His mission was off to a rocky start. He still needed to delay Allanby.

That morning, instead of the smell of fresh coffee made by his assistants, Allanby woke up to the face of Robert. He immediately said, "So you weren't late this time. I half expected you to be."

"Allanby," said Robert. "I found tracks—real tracks—out nearby the first location. Don't check the two other sightings. The tracks lead way up north in the desert area. I think that the snake might be there."

Allanby, half-awake, as he looked back at Robert, seemed more depressed than ever. "Robert, don't you know? Our investors just backed out. This expedition is over. I just told the team yesterday, which you missed out on," he said.

"No!" Robert was out of options. He had no choice but to tell Allanby—even if Allanby knew where Robert would go, he would never be able to follow the tracks as fast as him. "Listen, there's another expedition team that arrived here last night. I—followed them last night. They had equipment. I think they're some sort of rival team. You were right. They are misleading us. So who cares about the investors? If we find the snake first, it won't matter. We have to be quick."

Robert expected to inspire a rush of determination, but Allanby did not seem agitated in the slightest. Instead, he simply said, "We'll check it out," with a curl of a smile on his lips.

"Great. I put the map on your nightstand. I'll meet you there."

Robert left the cabin, heading straight for Ajay's house. Now that he had the team distracted, he had time to ask Ajay for more answers. He was sure that Ajay knew the true location of the snake. Even

if Nigel tried to steal the journal, Robert still had Ajay.

However, as soon as Robert approached Ajay's house, he was shocked. The door was left open and the entire house—all the tables and relics and paintings and statues—looked as if a tornado had gone right through them. Almost everything was either broken or upside down.

In a corner of the cabin, Ajay was there with his back facing Robert, trying to pick up pieces of a broken vase. "What happened here, Ajay?" asked Robert.

Ajay spun around, holding pieces of broken glass in his hands. Robert had never once in his life seen someone so desperately upset, terrified of whatever had just happened.

"They—they broke into my house. Stole my notes. My maps." Ajay's hand was shaking. His wise persona disappeared from his face. Instead, he transformed into a hopeless man.

"Wait—who did?"

"A few men with British accents. They came here a day ago."

"Okay now, Ajay, I will help you later, I promise. But please, what did they take? I already know about the snake. Tell me, what exactly did they take?"

Ajay sighed. "Everything." He stood up. "Robert, you were right. This town has lied to you and I am sorry. We did not trust you. We did not trust anyone. I told Jack to mislead you on purpose. But now we have brought these men in—and it is my fault."

Suddenly, someone touched Robert's shoulder. Robert jumped—it was Jack. "What in God's name happened here?"

"Call the police," said Robert. "Quickly." Jack ran off.

Ajay came up to Robert. "Listen. A long time ago, this town was thriving. This is because we used to have an opal mine which made a lot of people move here. But one day, people started disappearing. People like—your father. He was the first.

And then, things got worse. All sorts of bad things happened. The opal mines collapsed—not just once, but daily. One day, the opal just—stopped coming. One day you saw a cave full of it and the next, it was all just rock. Stranger things began to happen. Children started disappearing. Droughts—it stopped raining. Animals turned up dead for no reason..."

Robert was shocked. "You knew my father?"

"It does not matter. Listen, Robert. These men have come here for greed. It is my fault for trying to hide everything, pretending as if this town was wealthy. We just needed money. We barely have electricity and cooling these days."

"Yes, but now I know how to track the snake. I just need you to tell me exactly where it is."

"No, my son. There is no snake—that's what you don't understand. Maybe at one time this town was prosperous, but now, we have nothing. Besides, those men took all of your father's notes and his maps. They're probably going to cross the cave."

"What do you mean there's no snake? Of course there's a snake."

"Do not be misguided. I warn you, leave now. Do not follow them. You cannot save them. I must also confess—I lied to you about the man with the scar. His name is John Kamen. He left years ago to live on the other side—well, good luck."

"Wait." Robert reached into his pocket and took out the blue stone that Ajay had previously given to him—and put it in Ajay's right hand, closing it. He now realized that it was made out of a granite of some sort.

"No, Robert, you need this more than me. Take it back," Ajay said.

"You said it yourself. It's protection."

The sounds of gunshots erupted near to where they were. Robert was running out of time. As Ajay desperately tried to hand back the stone, Robert closed the door shut.

The sounds of gunfire got louder and louder, echoing across the land. Robert ran over to his cabin. Allanby's brother and Nigel, along with the rest of the British team, had their guns facing Allanby's team.

Nigel, the British man, immediately spotted Robert and pointed a gun at him.

"Ah, Robert Forrest! The reptile hunter! So nice to see you! Come over here." Robert slowly walked over to Nigel.

As he neared closer, he saw that the entire team had been compromised—including Cooper, who had a gun five inches from his face, pointed to him. This was all Robert's fault.

"You know, I'm such a huge fan of your show. Can you do something for me?"

Robert gulped. Normally, he would be annoyed in times like this, but a gun makes all of the difference. "Yeah."

"Say the thing you say at the beginning of the show. Say it."

Robert paused for a moment. "What?" Nigel leaned over closer to him, with his expression turning from playful to menacing.

Nigel popped the gun into the air, making everyone jump. "Say it."

"I'm Robert Forrest, and I'm the Reptile Hunter."

Nigel smiled. "That's right. Not so hard now, was it? Now that we've got that out of the way..."

He walked over to the rest of the team, examining at each of them, seemingly picking them out like apples at a grocery store. Finally, he settled with Anna, and pointed a gun at her.

"So, reptile hunter. Let's make a deal. You show us where your father's map is, and she can live. Probably."

"What are you talking about?"

Allanby's brother reached into his own pocket and revealed Robert's bracelet against the sunlight. Carved inside of every bead was a clear piece of opal—beautiful, rainbow opal.

"We found this in the forest, by the ash line, right where you fainted." He pointed inside one of the blue beads. "Pure opal. Right there, inside of it. You know, before the trip, I wasn't sure about the whole thing with your father, going off on some random tip from a bald guy."

Robert was shocked. Was he talking about Kamen, or somebody else?

"But when I saw this—well—that confirmed it. So cut the bullshit. Give us the map, and we'll leave this little town alone. Not burn down all of the buildings when we leave it, perhaps."

Robert had no choice. "I had no idea about the opal, I swear. But if you really think my father was

involved with this, then the journal and the map are in the cabin, under my bed."

Nigel threw down Anna. "Thank you very much." He walked inside the cabin.

As soon as Nigel was gone, Lester looked at Robert and winked his eye. Robert gave him a confused look. Lester ever so slightly motioned his finger and pointed behind him. Robert immediately noticed that five pairs of shotguns were lined up against the walls of the cabin.

He turned back to Lester, who began to nod his head. Robert knew that this was a bad idea. He nodded his head no. Suddenly, Allanby's brother turned back to Robert, and started to observe him, ruining the plan.

Just when things seemed to be hopeless, the sound of gunshots rang out behind Robert. He spun around—it was Jack Archer, alongside the Newhaven police force, with dozens of guns in between them.

The team cheered. "Shit!" Allanby's brother and the British team quickly shot back at the police, erupting into a large scale firefight, with people getting hit left and right as bullets whizzed past Robert. While they got away in their Jeeps, they managed to take Cooper with them.

Without thinking, Robert ran past all of the gunfire and made his way straight towards the two Jeeps, running towards the secret path in the forest, past the falling rocks sign, and past the ash line. No matter what, he had to save Cooper. He had to find him, and bring him back. For his daughter.

Soon, the gunfire evaporated into nothing, and Robert found himself completely alone, in the middle of the forest—lost.

Suddenly, audible footsteps in the grass came up behind Robert. He spun around.

It was Allanby, holding a 12-gauge shotgun pointed directly at his chest.

"Take me to your leader."

21
OFFER OF ADMISSION

Robert lay still in the grass, staring through his binoculars to catch the sight of something—anything—in the highland fields of Indiana.

He noticed a brief sign of movement in the grass, and his heart leapt with excitement. Carefully, he reached for the snake stick in his back pocket.

Before he could do anything else, Robert heard the familiar roar of Jeeps in the distance, on the road right next to the fields. He sighed—it was over now.

Robert stood up. Professor Allanby of the University, along with a few assistant students who were lucky enough to get on the expedition, approached him.

"Any luck?" asked Allanby.

Robert sighed. "No. And no need to rub it in, I know you already found it."

"Actually, we didn't. Not yet." Robert was surprised. He then still had a chance, after all. A chance to win a teaching job.

One of the assistants giggled. "So much for your 'instincts', Mr. Forrest."

Robert ignored him. He closed his eyes and felt the wind in his hair, the sounds of the corn in the fields rubbing up against each other, the feeling of the Earth itself breathing.

Robert smiled. He knew the snake was here—he felt it.

"We're going to another location. The one we planned out. You can stay here if you want," said Allanby.

"What about our deal?" said Robert. "You promised, right? If I find the snake by myself for your collection, you'll get me a teaching job?"

Allanby smiled. "No celebrity is getting hired into *my* university without proper experience. So if you do find the snake without your TV crew to help you, then yes, I think you're good enough to be a teacher with us."

"Did you know that I have a photographic memory?" added Robert. Allanby didn't reply and simply got back in the car, driver's side.

With that, the Jeep drove away, taking the laughing assistants with them. Robert learned to ignore them. Instead, he focused on the snake. He knew it had to be somewhere here.

Soon, the minutes turned to more minutes and those turned into what seemed like hours.

Up above, Robert could see that the dark clouds in the distance were about to overwhelm the beautifully sunny day they were having. In the distance, the owner of the farm was yelling at Robert to leave.

Robert's deep trance was snapped. It was hopeless. It would rain in a matter of minutes. In his mind, he could only think of giving up. It was pointless. *You haven't caught anything in years*, he said to himself. And it was true. It was as if the show had taken away his power to catch anything by himself.

For one last time, Robert looked around the area to find the snake. He was desperate. He had to do

this now, or never. He knew the snake was here—his instincts had to be right. Or had they really faltered away, after years of not being in use?

He had no choice. Quickly, Robert got back into his Jeep and drove off, prepared to go to Allanby in defeat, prepared to get a job as a waiter in some small diner.

Suddenly, his car hit a dent on the road—some sort of a bump. Robert slammed the brakes—could it be?

He got out of the car. Just then, he saw it—the tail of the snake, as golden as it was in legend. It was slightly injured from his car, but seemed to be mostly fine, quickly slithering away, sensing the storm.

Robert had no time. He dropped the stick and lunged at it. Just as he felt it slip out of his hands, he tightened his grip at the very last moment, and managed to hold it down by its tail. He stared deeply into his eyes—as he had always done. It was the herding eye—Now, he had caught the snake. He was its master.

He laughed. Allanby and the team were probably searching and walking around like monkeys for hours, while his method of waiting by instinct was proven right—he was right all along. His instinct had never gone away. And now, he had won by it.

Robert made his way back to the team, snake in hand. It took a long time—especially with a snake trying its best to control the Jeep's steering wheel.

Allanby and the whole team were inside of their Jeep. Allanby seemed nervous, talking to someone on the phone. Robert got out of the car and walked over, knocking on their car window, making them all jump. He raised the snake in his hand.

Allanby stepped outside. "Jesus, Robert. You were gone for hours."

"Hours? Didn't seem like it."

Allanby chuckled. "All right, I'm getting wet. Give me the snake. I'll hire you, but if this was just beginner's luck, I'll know. And I'll be there to fire you too."

One of the assistants rolled down the window—the same one who laughed at him.

"What are you gonna call him?"

"What's your name?" asked Robert.

"My name? Ralph."

Robert smiled. "Okay, Ralph. I'll call the snake Ralph, then."

Suddenly, the rain began to slow until eventually, the sky turned into blue again. As Robert got into his car and drove following Allanby who was off to the university, he raised his hand out of the window victoriously. Up above, he saw a faint rainbow.

22
THE HUNT

The gun shocked Robert deeply to his core. He never expected Allanby to pull something like this on him. Maybe his brother Earl, but certainly not Fred.

Back in Deeragun, all had turned into a warzone. People were being pulled out of their homes left and right and those homes were being set on fire. A once peaceful townsfolk ran around like wild animals, in between police on one side, and heavily armed soldiers on the other.

To make matters worse, Cooper was still gone, leaving his daughter Mary behind. Ajay may have hidden the truth about the town, but it was really Robert's fault for letting himself go on this trip—and attracting so much bad attention towards the town.

"Well?" Allanby pushed Robert's shoulder with his gun. For one of the first times in his life, Robert had absolutely no idea what to do next.

Allanby didn't know that Robert had no real tracks—just a map in his memory, some beads, and a stone carving.

"We have to help them first," said Robert.

"We'll help them when I get the rainbow snake and bring it back. Then they'll leave," said Allanby.

"Relax. I know my brother. He wouldn't kill anyone."

Still, Robert stayed hidden behind the bush, looking onward as each of his colleagues and friends that he had known for years, all watched as their town was being torn apart. A once beautiful town was now overrun by blood hungry monsters. It was a planet of the apes.

Allanby cocked the gun at Robert. "Where are the tracks you found? The ones on the map?"

Allanby was getting impatient. Robert had no choice but to lead him to whatever tracks he could find, at least based on his own memory, if not the map.

"We'll follow the ash line. The tracks end somewhere along there. But only if you promise to help me save them after," said Robert.

Allanby laughed. "I'm the one with the gun."

"If you shoot me, you lose my knowledge and your cover. So let's just agree to disagree."

Allanby said nothing, and Robert started moving forward. They slowly crept below the bush along the ash line. As they got further away from the town, the sounds of explosions and screams spiked Robert deeply in the heart. He had no choice but to ignore them. Even if he tried to help, he would be captured and killed in a second, rendering himself useless.

Eventually, they walked so far into the forest that all sounds faded. Again, Robert noticed that there were no birds—no animals—nothing. Not even spiders or bugs.

In a country where insects infest every corner of the land, it was strange to only see one spider in the entirety of the expedition.

Robert decided to interrogate Allanby. "So what does your brother do, besides being a mass killer?"

"Hey, watch it," said Allanby. "I told you already. He works for a box company designed for snakes and reptiles."

"That's clearly a lie. Don't you know anything else about your brother, maybe something like burning ants with a microscope, that might lead him to do this?"

"Well, he did burn ants with a microscope when he was a kid. But I don't know anything about him other than the fact that he majored in Geology in college. I don't see how that's relevant."

And then, Robert saw it. Of course. His brother was looking for rocks, probably opal. That's why there was all that noise back at the caves—and all of this drama. There's no way someone would go through all the trouble of hiring a British team and taking over an entire town. He had to convince Allanby about this.

"Fred," said Robert, "Why did you end up reversing your decision and hiring me for the team after that one phone call?"

Allanby said nothing. "Well?" asked Robert. "We're at the last moment here. Might as well tell me why."

"Oh, and you want to know all of my life secrets as well, while you're at it? I hired you because my brother called me and said that he wanted you on the team. That's why."

Robert smiled. "Don't you see all the dots connecting now? Fred, when you thought I was chasing the snake, I was really investigating all of this. This town used to be an opal mine. Then it got

shut down. I guess your brother thought that I found a new mine and wanted it to myself, on that show."

Allanby stopped in his tracks and raised his gun at Robert. "Or maybe you just found the snake and you don't want to tell me."

Robert raised his hands, but soon noticed that they had reached the ash line where the tracks were. But the tracks were gone—not a trace of them anywhere.

He gulped. "Fred, the tracks were here."

"What?"

"It doesn't matter. Let's just follow where I saw the tracks were leading. I think Ajay wiped them out."

Allanby seemed suspicious but decided to follow Robert anyways. The truth was that Robert really had no idea where he was going. It had now been around thirty minutes into the walk, and Robert half expected to be shot and dead by the night.

But his greatest fears were soon expired when he saw it clearly—snake tracks, once again, right past the ash line in the dirt.

Suddenly, they both heard footsteps behind them. Allanby spun around, gun in hand, only to see Ajay, standing right there, with a look of desperation on his face.

"Ajay?" said Robert.

"Ajay!" yelled Allanby. "I *knew* that you two were in on it together! I knew it! You guys are trying to mislead me, aren't you? You were trying to mislead the whole team! You traitor!"

"Fred, calm down," said Robert. "I don't know why Ajay came here."

Allanby cocked his gun. "You don't know? How else did he find us out of *instinct*? You led him here!

Ajay raised his hands. In his right hand, he carried a blue stone—the stone of granite that he had tried to give to Robert in the cabin.

"Robert, you must take this. I took it from the British men when the police came."

"Ajay, are you crazy!? Fred is going to shoot you! Just run back there and find the police!"

"Oh no you don't," said Allanby. "This is all part of your plan, isn't it? Trap me and send the police after me? Well, it isn't going to work."

Ajay, seemingly ignoring Allanby, walked forward towards Robert and reached out his hand to give the stone to him. "NO!" yelled Robert. The sound of an ear-piercing gunshot exploded across the forest, and smoke emerged from Allanby's shotgun. The next moment, Ajay was down on the ground—gone.

Robert could not bear to look at him. Instead, he collapsed on the ground too, his mind struggling within itself to accept what had just happened.

Allanby turned to Robert, and he dropped his gun. As they locked eyes, Robert saw nothing but madness in him—nothing but pure, animalistic madness.

Suddenly, something inside Robert awoke again. The voices—they returned. Whispers flooded his ears, his vision turned into an endless white, and a headache so strong that it defied all bounds of pain returned to him once again.

Allanby put down his gun and went over to help Robert, nearly stepping over Ajay's body. "Are you okay?"

The noise cleared. This time, there were no flashes or visions, but Robert's nose still bled. "Yeah. I'm fine. This just means we're on the right track."

"Jesus Christ. Is this how you've found all of your snakes without your TV show crew? Random outbursts and nose bleeding? What kind of 'instinct' is that, Robert?"

Suddenly, something in the grass moved. An animal of some kind. Both he and Allanby stayed silent, as they both knew that there were no animals in this town. This was definitely something that they needed to see.

Then—he saw it, right ahead of them—the snake.

The rainbow snake.

The one that he had been led to by the visions, the one his father had searched for into obsession and madness, the very same one that Ajay said wasn't real.

It was right there, in front of them, perfectly placed by the hand of God.

"Fred. Stay still." Robert slowly crept towards the snake. It did not flinch, and neither did he. They both seemed to share a connection—and they both felt it. Robert looked into the eyes of the snake and what he saw was... beautiful.

Without warning, Allanby dove into the grass and wrestled with the snake, as it began to hiss and strike at him. Luckily, he managed to catch it by the neck in his hands before it could do any harm. Robert wanted to complain but he was too overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of the snake's rainbow scales.

It was as in his dreams, but more beautiful than he could have ever imagined. The skin itself was like a painting of hundreds—millions—of colours that the human eye could not possibly hope to begin to comprehend.

Neither Robert nor Allanby said anything. Their passion and hate for each other was gone—completely dissolved in comparison to the sheer beauty of the snake.

As Robert reached over to feel the snake's skin, he realized that as he came closer—something seemed off with the snake. It didn't have a tint to it, like he had thought it would. It seemed too realistic.

Almost—painted.

It was the wrong snake.

Allanby began to loosen his grip and let the snake crawl around his arm. "*No!*" yelled Robert. Without warning, the snake lunged at Allanby's face and Robert dove in, protecting him with his hand.

The snake's fangs stuck itself for a few moments deep into the palm of Robert's hand. He felt the sting immediately, and the venom raced throughout his body and turned into an aching, hot numbing sensation that pulsed through his veins and into his upper body in a matter of seconds.

By the time Robert had a chance to react, he had fallen to the ground below and the snake had slithered away into oblivion.

Allanby lied down in shock. After he calmed down his breathing, he examined Robert's hand. It was bleeding rapidly from the two holes left by the snake's fangs.

He did not bother to help him. With the invasion of the town, even Robert knew he was a lost cause to the Eastern Brown snake's venom. It acted faster than cyanide and they both knew it.

Allanby retrieved his gun and began to walk away. He looked back at Robert one last time.

"Where—are you going?"

"I'm sorry, Robert. This was my fault. I realize now that pursuing this—this snake—was all just a big mistake. I'm going to find my brother and I'm going to fix all of this. Nobody else is going to die today."

And with that, Allanby retreated and Robert was left alone in the woods, to die. He would never be found—just like the rainbow serpent. They were connected, in that way.

Everything turned to black.

23
THE INCIDENT

On Friday in February of 2004, Robert arrived to the town of Deeragun in Queensland of Australia, along with his crew, in their one last ditch effort catch and film the legendary rainbow snake.

Robert spent months beforehand, in secret from his wife, of course, preparing and collecting everything he ever knew about Deeragun and the rainbow serpent, mostly based on legends and what his father had told him. Now, that day had finally come for him to find it once and for all.

But after Robert had finished filming the initial scene, with his iconic "and I'm the Reptile Hunter" line, things got bad. Once again, a storm had begun, with water pouring in as it never had before in Australia.

Still, Robert forced the crew to work through the storm. He knew that he had something here. He felt it—the instinct. He knew that the rainbow serpent would be here. He felt it. It was his destiny—the only way—the right path. It had to be.

But after a long day of searching and grueling hard work from Robert and his crew, they had found absolutely nothing. Not a trace.

The day was nearly over, and all that they could have done was done. Robert had around fifty missed

calls from his wife, whom he had not talked to since he first left after the accident on set.

Eventually, even Cooper came up to tell Robert—"It's over. We checked all the maps. We checked all the locations. No tracks at all. We checked everything." A woman, who appeared to be Cooper's wife, came up behind him angrily.

Cooper put his hands on Robert's shoulder, who was now shaking. "I'm sorry, Robert. It's over."

It's over. It's over. It's over. The words continually rang inside Robert's skull in a loop. He felt like he wanted to shatter like glass.

A crew member came up to him, holding a map of possible locations. "Robert, we have one last location, but the power lines were cut down by a tree falling in the storm. We can't check it out."

"Where is it?" asked Robert, barely holding in his frustration.

"It's the entrance area. That half mountain."

"Whatever. Call it all off. Call off all of the crew. It's over. We're shutting down."

Without another word, the crew member left. Robert sat down on a log outside in the storm, with the rain pummeling down hard on him, as he stared into the distant woods.

Robert's mind began to clear. His obsession faltered for a moment, and something told him to call his wife.

He took his phone out of his pocket, and while covering himself from the rain with his jacket, he called his wife.

RINGGG. RINGGG. RINGGGGG.

The phone was picked up. Robert sighed, until he heard a loud BEEP and the voicemail robot activated.

He began to check all of the messages, and clicked the most recent one—51 minutes ago.

His wife's voice immediately calmed him down. He forgot about the storm—the locations—the serpent and the show—everything—as he remembered how her voice had calmed him down—how it changed everything.

"Hey! Please pick up. I went all the way down to Queensland. On my way to see you."

Robert's heart leapt out of his chest. "Look, Robert, I'm not mad at you. I just want to see you. I just want you to stop this. If you get this message, let's just go home, okay?"

He looked up into the sky, and suddenly realized the severity of the situation. There was no way that Claire could drive in this weather. She must have stopped on the road somewhere.

Dropping his phone and jacket, Robert ran towards the road, adrenaline pumping in his veins. He ran like he had never run before in his life—he had to find her. He had to. It was his last hope.

In the distance, he saw what seemed to be like a parked car, with visible headlights.

"Claire!? CLAIRE!!!"

As he ran closer, his greatest fears were confirmed. As he got closer to the car, he saw that it was completely turned over, with pieces of metal and scraps thrown across the road. Smoke came out of the car—this was recent.

The car was a complete wreck—it was as if someone had chopped it in half with a saw blade.

Robert felt his chest thump rapidly—his heart went at a million miles per hour.

His looked behind the edge of the car, only to see the worst sight, the most awful thing—that a man

could possibly see in his life. He collapsed on the ground and crawled over to her body.

The body was torn apart. Robert could not make out the blood and the mud from the rain. It all mixed in together like soup.

Robert cried like a baby, like a child, raising her head to face him with his right arm.

"Claire!"

For a moment, she opened her eyes and faced Robert. Robert was excited. She stared at him, looked at him, with her last brief flicker of consciousness—the last bit of life that she still had. Robert could see a small wrinkle of a smiling face.

But then—just like that, her eyes turned cold and lifeless, into oblivion.

Robert yelled out like an animal. He desperately tried to open her eyelids with his hand, hoping to see one last glimmer in her eyes. A new hope. But there was nothing, nothing except cold, lifeless eyes, like a reptile.

He was entranced by her eyes for a moment. This image would always haunt him—how she appeared like a ragdoll—a reptile, soul gone.

Robert closed her eyes with his right hand and let her go down onto the ground. He collapsed. He no longer cared about finding snakes, or his show, or the rain, or his friends, or the beach, or the town, or his memories, or the body—he didn't care. He didn't want to think about anything ever again. He didn't want to be on the show ever again. He was done. Finished. With her loss, he was done with all of it—this time, it was for good.

24
LEFT FOR DEAD

Robert awoke in an everlasting field, stretching far into the oblivion of the horizon. He felt a serene happiness—as if nothing could ever hurt him, and all of his worries and fears were locked away in the past—a small jar forever closed.

He was free to go anywhere he pleased, forever, caught up in nothing but the endlessly drifting wind. The wind whistled into pleasant singing until Robert began to recognize a familiar voice—Claire's voice.

But soon, the numbing pain pulsing throughout Robert's right hand returned, and he was reminded of where he truly was. Not free yet. The singing halted to a stop.

The green grass fields slowly faded away and turned into red sand. The sky turned into a shade of black. An echoing roar high from above pierced Robert's ears. A white light appeared from the dark sky. A large serpent's shadow emerged, cascading across the sky above.

And then—it moved towards him. He first noticed the eyes—the golden eyes. The sands burst into flames, and he was engulfed by them. He fell into the dark abyss below as the serpent followed him. He made a desperate attempt to reach his numb right hand to the last of the light from above, where the singing began, but as the serpent reached him

and slammed into him, he heard a call trembling into his skin—a voice; "*You have work to do.*"

With another flash of the rainbow serpent's glittering golden eyes, he awoke.

Robert felt terrible. Half of his body up was numb, and the dull pain had turned into a searing hot pain covering most of his arm and his upper body. He was trembling and covered in sweat, just lying helplessly in the grass. He started to remember what he had said on his show once before, as a warning to his own audience—"*the effects of an Eastern Brown snake's venom can kill you in under half an hour.*"

His own voiceover from the show rang in his head. That Hollywood, cheap acting-so-happy host voice. "*They cause the majority of the one to five deaths from snake bites each year, usually from early collapse and cardiac arrest. Cardiac arrest happens within 30 minutes of the bite. Early basic life support from bystanders is most important for snake bites because this can keep someone alive until they're transported to hospital.*"

He was scouring for something in his mind—anything to help him. But this didn't help—he didn't have anti-venom, or bystanders—he was miles away from any hospital, and the town was being invaded by a bunch of angry British men.

As Robert got up, barely able to stand with the numbing effects of the venom running down to his

thighs, he started to run forward, with all of his might—pure will—challenging his mind.

Suddenly, he tripped over a body—Ajay's body—his lifeless corpse. He only then began to remember what had just happened—where they had just been—and started to take it all in. He wanted to cry, and do nothing but mourn, but he had to move on. He had no choice. Ajay was dead—his eyes were cold—and he would have wanted Robert to keep moving forward.

As Robert got up to leave, something stopped him. He froze. He forgot something—something important.

The memory of it came back to him. Robert reached for Ajay's right hand. He grabbed the blue covered rock of granite, and put it in his back pocket, getting up to leave.

Robert ran forward. Despite all of it stacking against him, Robert knew that he had to live. He no longer tried to explain it, or ration with it. He just knew that however he made it, he had to make it somehow. It was destiny.

25
THE CABIN

After what just happened Robert decided to walk all the way back to the camp and to finally return home. He had enough of it all. The visions, the betrayal, the tracking.

All he wanted was to finally go to his house in the States and retire, as he was supposed to. It wasn't his job to track snakes anymore.

The walk back was the single most painful and frustrating experience of Robert's life. He was delirious—completely dehydrated. To make matters even worse—he had no idea where he was.

Robert thought of the old times to comfort himself. Long walks on the beach. The dry, hot sand. The blaring sun, the calming swaying of the ocean. This comforted him.

But the walk didn't last for long. Eventually, he stumbled across a small cabin, which he had never seen before. It seemed too good to be true.

He had no time to question it. There was a visible light—he ran inside.

Just then, a man appeared in front of him. Robert's blurred vision faded into clearness, and he saw him again—that bald man, John Kamen, with the scar on his forehead. Standing right there, in the middle of the forest, like nothing had happened.

John walked up to him. He was carrying a fragment of some sort of gem in his hands. It was unlike anything Robert had ever seen in Australia's landscape—it seemed to have some sort of a rainbow glow to it.

With it, the man touched the snake's bite on the palm of Robert's hand. Immediately, the pain and numbness retreated.

Robert stood up. His headaches—his aching—his numbness—it was all gone in an instant. Quicker than the highest quality anti-venom in the world.

He checked the bite itself, and noticed that the two bite marks on his skin had become so small in size that they seemed like pencil pricks. The bleeding had stopped nearly instantly.

"Who are you?" asked Robert.

The man said nothing. He didn't seem annoyed, or happy, or shocked. It just seemed like a routine occurrence to him.

Robert had to know who he was. His entire life's research into venom and snake bites—had all disappeared into an instant. For all he knew, this man had used magic on him.

"Who are you?" Robert asked again.

This time, the man spoke, "You know who I am."

"John Kamen," Robert said. "Why did you heal me?"

"I told you. You're special. We need you for a greater purpose. We need you to make it past the caves."

"I'm tired of all of this. I'm just going to find the snake and leave. You can go to the caves yourself, if you want to."

The man said nothing again, and simply walked away into the bush. Robert stood still in shock, until the man was gone as if he was never there.

Robert could no longer question whether this was real or not. His hand was healed—it was a miracle that he had never seen before.

Robert stayed at the cabin for what felt like an entire day. He drank water from the well, and had peaceful serenity for a while as he simply sat in the porch chair and admired the scenery, thinking back to his childhood.

There were no visions—nothing. All the chaos was gone, cancelled out amidst the peacefulness of the cabin. He had even forgotten entirely about the invasion of his hometown—all of it.

Eventually, John came back, and he had some dead animal in his hands from a hunt. Robert couldn't help but question him more. "You need to tell me who you are," he said.

"I'm nobody. It doesn't matter."

"What do you mean? Look, Ajay told me that you used to live in Deeragun. Did you know my father?"

Kamen said nothing, but with his look, Robert knew the truth. He had definitely known him—and something had happened.

"What happened to my father, Kamen?" asked Robert. He didn't reply.

For a while, neither of them said a word to each other. Robert knew that Kamen wouldn't answer any of his questions. Not yet, anyways.

Robert felt for the bracelet in his pocket, but remembered that he had lost it—and how he had lost it. He did, however, still have the stone in his back pocket.

He stood up. Kamen seemed to know where Robert was going, and handed him a rope, which Robert placed under his belt.

Robert knew what he had to do—he still had that familiar feeling of destiny in the back of his head. He had a nice long day's break—but it had returned. That feeling. He had a new mission now.

First stop—Deeragun.

26
SAVING DEERAGUN

When Robert finally arrived to Deeragun, he found the town to be entirely empty. Even the British team was gone—campfire and all. Even worse, the team's cabin as well as a few others had been burned down to a crisp—only a few sticks had remained. Robert briefly feared that somehow, they had all burned up in the fires, but still, he had a strange feeling that somebody was around. Somewhere in the town, he knew that people were still alive. He felt it.

Robert's first priority was Cooper's cabin—his daughter, to be specific. He had not seen her at all since the morning of the day of the invasion.

When he arrived there, he noticed that the door was already opened, which gave him a jolt in the heart. He regretted not bringing any weapons with him—the shotgun would be wise, perhaps. To make matters worse, all of the rooms were completely empty—including hers. It was only at the very last moment that he discovered a note on her bed reading:

"SAFE"

Safe? What did this mean? Was this the British team which had left a note for the police? Maybe

Cooper had escaped with her? Maybe she had found some sort of a safe passage on her own and escaped? Or a safe haven?

Robert couldn't think about it now. His next stop was Ajay's house.

As he reached it, he knew that Ajay wasn't there. Neither was Jack. Neither was anyone. The whole town was empty—it might as well have been a ghost town.

Then, suddenly, he heard a small squeak from the abandoned cabin of Kamen. He waited five seconds—then, another. Then, another. The squeak returned again.

It was a signal.

Robert immediately ran over to the cabin and noticed that the door was closed. He knocked on it five times, and the door was opened.

Inside, in the dirty, darkly lit room, Robert saw a group of huddled together people and managed to make out their faces. He breathed a sigh of relief. The whole town was there—Ajay, Jack, Mary, and all of them. Robert breathed a sigh of relief as they all welcomed him into the cabin.

"Are they gone? Did they leave?" Jack seemed desperate, and everyone in the town seemed scared out of their minds. After all, something like this had never happened in a quiet town like this, or any city, for that matter. Not since the first World War.

"They left," said Robert. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Next, Robert asked, "What happened to Cooper?"

From the back of the cabin, Robert noticed that Allanby's team was also there. A hooded figure with them seemed hesitant to reveal itself. But it wasn't Cooper.

The figure turned around and revealed itself to be Dr. Allanby. The murderer. Robert was shocked. Had they known? He tried to conceal his rage, while Allanby gave him a look that said something like "take this outside."

"Cooper's gone," said Jack. "He left along with the rest of the British team so they could use him as a hostage instead of the rest of us."

Jack had his hands around Mary's shoulder, who never seemed sadder. After all, she mostly likely believed that it was her fault. But it wasn't—it was his.

"We're going to Newhaven for help. The phone lines don't work here. Can you help us walk? It's a five-mile walk." Robert strained his eyes to look for the voice of the man who said that—until he saw a police officer—someone who he recognized. It was Mike, from Newhaven. From that school. He barely recognized his face—after all, it had been years—decades, in fact—and he was not very good with faces. He was surprised to see a badge on him.

But he had no time to mention it to him, the fact that they knew each other, even though they both clearly recognized each other.

"Let's go," said Robert.

Without any doubt in his voice or his mind, he led the town onward, out of the cabin. He didn't tell them that his show was a fake, and that he was a fraud, and he didn't really have master tracking and trail walking experience. But they didn't need that right now. Right now, they needed a leader, someone to protect them. And right now, he fitted into that role well.

As soon as they reached Newhaven, walking right past a large monument of Newhaven's founder, Robert felt the sense of someone watching him. He motioned to Jack that he thought somebody was around.

But as soon as they reached the entrance to the town, the feeling passed. It wasn't the British men—the serpent was watching him leave Deeragun.

When they finally reached the populated areas of the town, the townspeople as well as the rest of the Newhaven police force greeted them and helped them with emergency aid, as well as taking in stories and witness accounts. As the police questioned Allanby, Robert gave him a look of disappointment—knowing that he would lie to them. According to Jack, they had been overwhelmed by the British team's forces and the police were forced to back down.

"What kind of people hire a squad of soldiers for a rainbow snake?" said Jack. He seemed shocked. But Robert was the only one who knew the truth—this wasn't all just for a snake.

In the distance, Mike was still questioning the townspeople—he had a bullet wound in his shoulder. He gave a brief look to him, and Robert gave him a brief look back. And that was enough.

Later in the day, Robert started to get nervous as he was losing more and more time. He had to figure out how to get past the caves—and fast. If the rainbow snake was anywhere, it had to be there.

As he examined the snake bite wound on his hand, Anna came up to him and he quickly hid it.

They both knew that they thought the same thing. "This wasn't all just for some snake, was it?" asked Anna. Robert didn't reply—he didn't need to.

"I heard that you didn't want to talk to the police," she said. "What happened to you up there, Robert? The last thing we saw was you and Allanby running away into the forest."

"We got split up," said Robert.

"And you just walked around and had a nice stroll for a few hours?"

Robert had no choice but to lie. "There were still those British men around the town, we couldn't come back."

As if she knew that he was lying to him, Anna got up and left to join the rest of the town's survivors. He sighed. No doubt that he had disappointed one of his own students.

Robert reached into his pocket for the bracelet, but felt nothing. He began to feel completely hopeless and utterly exhausted. He almost felt as if he would fall back asleep again, up until Allanby privately came up to Robert.

Robert's mind cleared, and he immediately pushed Allanby to the side of the wall, holding him there like a wild animal.

"What the hell!?" he yelled. There were still people around, but he didn't bother to calm himself down. "You left me for dead! You killed Ajay! You monster!"

"I had no idea that you would dive in to stop the snake! It's not my fault!" said Allanby in retaliation. "And Ajay, well...that was just a mistake. Besides, how are you even alive?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm coming back to the police to tell them that you're a big fraud and you're gonna be taken to jail for a count of murder and attempted murder."

Robert started to get up and walk away. "Oh no you're not," said Allanby. Robert spun around. "Oh really?"

"I found my brother. And I'm sorry, Robert. You were right about everything. It appears that he's gone insane with opal fever."

"I know. And he's gonna get arrested with you. How does that help anything?"

Allanby smiled. "I'm not stupid, Robert. I saw your map, and the bracelet." He reached in from his pocket and handed the bracelet over to Robert. "You still want to get back to the caves, don't you?"

Robert took the bracelet observed it for a while, before putting it back in his pocket. He felt a strange sense of contentment, just then. "Well, they won't find anything back there, will they, Robert? But according to your map, there is a secret pathway, one leading all the way to the Outback, all the way to the sacred land. And that's where they all want to be."

"What do you mean?"

"You and I both want something. I want to talk to my brother, and you want to find the rainbow serpent. So we're gonna make a deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"I'm gonna take you to my brother's Newhaven private plane collection. In return, you won't rat us both out."

Robert paused for a moment to consider the deal. He knew that Allanby was right. If he was going to find the rainbow serpent, he had to make it past

those caves. Even if it was in the company of a murderer.

He reached over and shook his hand. "It's a deal."

27
AIR FORCE TWO

Robert and Allanby managed to sneak away before anyone could stop them from the rest of the survivors while they were speaking to the police. They eventually reached the main area of the docks, where five small planes stood by a bunch of boats.

Robert felt deeply nostalgic by the entire place. The smell of the lake's water and all of it—his memories flooded back, both good and bad.

"Which one's your brother's?" asked Robert.

"Pick one."

"What?"

"Pick one. They're all my brothers. And this new opal mine will buy him another ten planes," said Allanby.

Robert chuckled. "I thought your brother worked for a box company." He walked over to the first plane on the right and got inside on the passenger seat, with Allanby sitting down on the other seat.

Allanby grabbed the wheel and turned to Robert. "Do you know how to fly a plane?"

"Are you kidding me? No."

Allanby laughed. "I'm just kidding. I can fly it. I mean, in one of your episodes, you flew a plane just like this..."

"Yeah. I know." Robert began to wonder why Allanby was suddenly being so upbeat about the

whole situation. But then again, laughter is always better than anger—or fear.

Suddenly, someone behind them began to call out. It was a group of policemen with whistles, no doubt called after the pair had left the team.

They were wasting too much time. "Let's go," said Robert. Allanby shuffled around the plane looking for something—the keys were missing.

As the policemen gained closer, Robert locked the plane doors.

But Allanby still didn't find the keys. Eventually, the men came up to the plane. Robert recognized one of them—it was Mike. He started to bang on the plane door. "Step out of the car, please, sir," he said to Robert.

"Check under the seat," whispered Robert. Finally, Allanby reached under and found the keys, putting them into the ignition.

"Hey!!" yelled Mike. He raised his gun. The plane's engine sputtered and slowly began to move forward. "Robert! Get out of the plane!" This time, Mike had addressed him by name.

"Faster! Faster!" Robert's heart raced. The other policemen chased the plane and began to hit the window. Suddenly, the window broke open and a flush of air flooded the entire plane.

As Allanby pushed it forward, the plane gradually got faster and faster along the water until it finally took off. Robert looked behind him, back at the docks, just as a bullet zinged past him.

More bullets sprang about near the plane. Allanby pushed the plane to its maximum speed. Without warning, the bullets hit the plane like hail.

Suddenly, a red warning light erupted on the engine screen.

"What happened? Are we good?" asked Robert."

"No, we're not good." Allanby turned the plane around and headed back to Deeragun for the caves. "It's only a five-minute flight, but the bullet's pierced our fuel tank."

Just then, another bullet whizzed past them and hit the pane's rotor.

"And the rotor," said Allanby. The plane began to slow down.

They were high up. So high up, in fact, that Robert could touch the clouds with his bare hand through the bullet-ridden window. By now, they were nearing Deeragun, but the plane was rapidly slowing down.

"Are you sure you know how to fly a plane?" asked Robert. The plane began to rapidly shake and switch directions.

Slowly but surely, the engine made a strange noise and the plane's nose dipped towards the ground. Robert shot up from his seat. "We're gonna crash, aren't we? You don't really know how to fly a plane, do you!?"

"Steady up," said Allanby. We're gonna make a crash landing." He smiled.

With every second that passed by, the plane increased in speed faster and faster as it pummeled towards the ground below. Robert started to see, in his terror, that they were now dangerously low to the ground.

But they were close—he recognized the stone monument that they had passed just minutes ago on foot on the way to Newhaven.

Eventually, they reached Deeragun. By now, the plane was dangerously close to the ground and

sputtering from every cylinder—ready to crash at any moment.

Robert reached into his pocket and grabbed on to the bracelet, holding it tight. "*Please*," he said in his mind. "*Please let us make it past the caves. Please.*"

Finally, they were just above the secret pathway and Robert saw the mountain in the distance. "Yes!" Robert said. "We made it!"

"Oh no we didn't."

Allanby pointed to the distance, where Robert squinted only to see a large sandstorm forming. A sandstorm? In the middle of nowhere in Australia? Robert closed his eyes and braced himself for impact as the plane was now only a few metres off of the ground.

Just as it was about to hit, the sandstorm hit harder and Robert was overwhelmed with sand flooding into the plane.

Allanby yelled something, but Robert could not make out what he was saying over the enormously load roaring of the sandstorm. The sand was everywhere—it bounced off of the rotors, cracked through what was left of the windows, and tore through their clothes and skin, all with the sound and raw power of a hurricane.

Just when the sand pummelled them so much that Robert could not stand it any longer, it stopped in the blink of an eye.

When Robert opened his eyes, the plane had already crashed and lay in the ground in a wreck. It all happened in an instant—as if time had somehow skipped forward minutes ahead.

Robert, however, was completely untouched. He got out of the plane, thanking the heavens for still being able to walk, and started to cough up sand.

Allanby was untouched too, seemingly unaffected by karma, looking out into the distance.

"Nice landing," Robert said.

As his sight cleared, he looked past the broken and busted up plane and could faintly glimpse at a large desert filled with red sand.

Behind them, there was a large mountain of granite, and the entrance to a black void of a cave was open.

A bird squawked over their heads. Robert's vision and mind fully cleared.

They were in the Australian Outback.

PART 3
WALKABOUT

28
THE FIFTH PEAK

What immediately struck both Robert and Allanby the most was the heat. It eroded over their faces, bursting like a suntan over the span of a few seconds.

The climate was arid and dry. The region was packed to the brim with red sand, with some sporadically placed bushes in between. There were no trees, no rivers, and absolutely no water.

The plane—now beaten to a pulp and beyond repair—had crashed into the desert sand, but it had done its duty. They were only a dozen or so metres away from the entrance to a large cave within the mountain.

As Allanby headed over towards the caves, Robert examined the ground. There were clear Jeep tracks in the sand.

"What are we supposed to do now?" said Robert.

"It's a miracle we survived that crash landing at all. We need to build shelter in the cave," said Allanby, as he walked over to the dark, but considering the heat of the sun, surprisingly inviting entrance of the cave.

"Yeah. Beyond a miracle. Look at us—no scratches, nothing. It's like we're on a TV show. And that doesn't begin to explain how I don't even

remember what happened after we hit the sandstorm."

Allanby said nothing.

"I think that we should climb the peak," said Robert. "Find out where we are."

Suddenly, Allanby let out a shriek. Robert ran over to him, only to see two dead bodies piled up near the entrance of the cave, bodies of those soldiers that Robert saw in Nigel's camp. He recognized one of them—the blonde man. The one who told Nigel the joke.

They were ridden with bullets, eyes still wide open from the shock. Robert did not need to examine them with the little medical training he had to know that they were dead.

He gently closed their eyelids with his fingertips. "We should bury them," he told Allanby.

"Are you kidding me? We barely have any food or water. We don't have time to bury anyone now."

Robert sighed. After a bit of bickering between them, the two decided to head into the cave to find shelter from the scorching heat and to explore the pathways within it.

The interior of the cave was much nicer than the dry desert that was the Outback. There was no water, but it still felt humid enough to rest.

Still lit up by the light of the dawning sun, Robert could see some cave drawings like he saw earlier. They depicted a scary sight—native stickmen people attacking a giant rainbow serpent, which had just given them some rocks.

"Check this out," said Robert. Allanby, meanwhile, was more interested in the dead bodies. "What?"

"What do you think this means?" Robert pointed to the cave drawings.

"It doesn't matter. I came here to look for my brother and to bring him back, not to look at some cave drawings."

"Just tell me."

Allanby sighed in defeat. "Fine." He examined them for a moment. After a while, he explained, much like in a lecture;

"These drawings clearly depict a situation much like the colonization of Australia. The natives were blessed by the land with opal, represented by the serpent, but the white men came and took it away from them. The land became fragile and the natives locked the opal away."

It was in times like these that Robert truly understood why Allanby was at the top of the food chain at Brown University.

Still, he had some questions. "Don't you think this is what the town was hiding? All of those cave-ins...I know Australia. Even the most remote regions of the Outback are mapped out and have roads. I've never seen or heard of a plane like this."

It was true—Robert pointed to the desert—there were no visible roads or road signs for miles on end. It didn't just look deserted—it felt like a completely new country. It didn't make any sense. "Pair that up with the fact that we've somehow skipped time..."

Allanby, seemingly wanting to ignore the mystery, reached into his backpack and took out all of their remaining supplies.

Two bottles of water—one half-empty. Three granola bars. An apple. That was all there was.

Robert went over to the site of the crashed plane to check the survival package for emergencies. There was a flashlight and a first aid kit, but what

interested Robert the most was a map of the Outback they were supposed to be in.

Robert examined it. It made no sense. The area that Robert and Allanby were in, wherever it was, was surely not mapped out. In fact, the map depicted a highway next to Deeragun's forest caves.

That all-too familiar feeling of a throbbing headache began returning to Robert like an unwelcome visitor. His nose bled onto the map. Those strange voices emerged, whispering to him. With every second, they got louder and louder.

Robert reached for the bracelet in his pocket and threw it away, back into the caves. But it had made no difference. The voices got even louder. The headache even stronger. Like a vibration. Beside him, he saw that Allanby was also collapsed on the ground.

So it was affecting him too.

Suddenly, sound erupted from the desert. The sound of Jeeps. Allanby immediately called out—"EARL!". Robert, on the other hand, could make out the voice of Cooper, calling out to him from the caves.

Without thinking, Robert dove for the bracelet, captured it, and as hard as he could, threw it away, as far as he could, out into the desert. He then tackled Allanby.

"It's fake, it's fake," said Robert. He held him down until the voices and the headaches faded, and Allanby calmed himself down.

As Robert eased his grip, Allanby immediately got up and sprinted across the desert, far off into the distance. "EARL! EARL!" Allanby yelled. Robert desperately threw an apple at him. "Come back,

Fred!" he yelled. "It's fake! Don't listen to the voices!"

"My brother could be down there!" Allanby yelled back. And with that, he disappeared completely into the desert.

Now, Robert was alone, once more. He defeatedly retrieved the bracelet, for it was the one thing still familiar to him in this Outback. He then retreated to the caves, and set up camp.

Robert was truly lost. He had nothing to do but wait for the night to end so he could go out and look for Allanby. He often stared at his bracelet and thought of better times, waiting for the moon to light up the sky. He thought of climbing the peak of the mountain for a moment, and trying to make out the landscape.

But he couldn't shake the feeling—that feeling of somebody in the dark depths of the cave—watching him.

Every once in a while, a slithering sound emerged from somewhere in the cave, or sometimes it was hissing. It was easy to assume that there was a snake, lurking somewhere in the dark depths of the caves, waiting for Robert's slumber. And he didn't want to be bitten again.

Robert had enough. He decided to check out the cave before it got dark, and soon stumbled upon a long dark passage. As the night got darker it was clear that someone had already been there—as there was a faint glimmer of light in the distance. It was

but a spark, too small conclusively signal intelligent life, but Robert decided to follow the light anyways.

The passage was narrow and getting narrower—and then—Robert began to hear voices. Very faint voices—calling his name. These weren't the kind that came from his mind, these were distinctly, outwardly audible. Maybe he should have brought the flashlight with him.

He began to wonder if it was the effect of the bracelet returning to him—he had also felt the presence of the snake as he left the town, passing the monument—but it soon become clear that it was Cooper's voice.

"Hello!?" yelled Robert. His voice echoed across the cave.

Perhaps this was just a false voice. Like they had just experienced previously. But this was different—Robert felt no headaches—his mind was clear.

After a few moments, there was a reply.

"Robert?"

"Cooper!? What happened?"

"I fell down! Somebody set traps in the cave! Earl said he would come back with more help! Robert, don't go any further, get the police, there's something up there with you!"

Before Robert had a chance to react, he heard more hissing sounds. But he had bigger worries—Allanby's brother coming back, and him meeting the same fate as Fred apparently had.

"*I'm coming down to get you!*" yelled Robert.

Robert grabbed the rope he had under his belt, silently thanked Ajay for his Jedi future seeing skills, and tied the rope to a small stalagmite sturdy

in the ground. He threw the rope all the way down and slid on it.

To his greatest fears, the rope stopped before he felt the ground.

"How far down are you!?" he yelled.

"I said don't come down!!"

Robert took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He let go of the rope. With every second that he fell down, he felt a greater sense of panic.

One.

Two.

Three.

Finally, at exactly three seconds, he hit the ground hard, splashing in a thin pool of water. He felt a sharp rock nearly pierce the skin on his back, and let out a yell. But he was fine.

Robert turned to Cooper, who was faintly light up from a torch. He looked awful. His face was all dirty, and his shirt was covered by blood. Cooper could barely open his eyes.

"You shouldn't have come down here," Cooper said. "Now we're both stuck."

Drip.

"I'm your friend. I won't leave you behind," said Robert. He smiled at him.

Cooper blindly reached into his pocket and took out a pack of cards. "Might as well play some Hold 'Em if we're gonna be down here, right?"

"What did you say was down here again?"

Drip.

Cooper stayed silent for a moment. "When they took me to the caves, something happened. I mean, I don't know what. All I know, is that there were dozens of men inside the caves one moment, and

the next, there was a loud roar and they were all gone."

Drip.

"What kind of a roar? You mean the hissing sounds? Those are just snakes in the caves. Pretty common in Australia, right?"

Drip.

"Sure. Or maybe those crazy people hid poisonous snakes in the caves as traps for people like them. Just like this hole we're both stuck in right now, forever."

Cooper began to shuffle the deck of cards in his hands.

Drip. Drip.

"Cooper, I have something to tell you."

"What?"

"When you were fired...that was my fault. I told the producer that you caused the fire so we could do my rainbow snake episode."

Robert looked into Cooper's eyes and examined his face, and what he saw was a strange mixture of sadness—and relief.

"It's fine, Robert. That stuff is in the past anyways. Water under the bridge." Robert sighed in relief. He felt that same cold bliss he felt after vomiting out bad food. "Why do you want to find that snake so bad, anyways?"

"Because...I just want to look into its eyes, and I want to see the cold, lifelessness of it—what I saw in my wife's eyes."

Cooper said nothing. Instead, they both sat there quietly for a while, as Cooper shuffled his cards. But Robert knew that they would have to get out of the caves.

"Cooper, I don't think the police are coming back here. I came here with Allanby on a plane after I rescued the whole town and took them to Newhaven. We need to get out of here," Robert said. "I was led down here by someone. I didn't find this place by accident. There's gotta be some way out."

Robert looked around—or more accurately, felt around. With the pool of water that had formed inside the hole—he suddenly had an idea. "Cooper, what is that dripping sound?"

Drip.

"What?"

Suddenly, Robert grabbed his leg and began to hit the side of the wall. "Woah, Robert, what are you doing?"

He hit it twice, then three times more—then another—then another, until without warning, the cave rumbled and rumbled until it collapsed, and a rush of water flooded in from the side of the wall.

Robert laughed in joy—he was right. He knew that he had heard water here. It made sense—water being held in caves, perhaps by the natives of the land.

Immediately, the water lifted up to rise all the way to their chest level. "Float above it," said Robert. "Use it to grab on to the sides of the wall. It's just like rock climbing, trust me."

As the water rapidly rose to their level like a volcano, Robert grabbed on to the sides of the wall until he felt the rope above him, and he jumped up from the water and grabbed on to it. He turned around for Cooper and grabbed his hand. Cooper sighed and threw away the pack of cards he was holding in his hands into the rushing of water below.

"So much for gambling."

Just then, the water started to subside and it steadied just below the rope.

Robert's hand nearly exploded with pain as Cooper's entire weight brought him down. Still, Robert held tighter to the rope. To make matters worse, his snake bite was rubbing against the rope. He was losing his grip fast.

"I'm sorry, Robert. There's no way we'll both get out of here," said Cooper, just as Robert was beginning to lift him to the rope.

"No! Keep holding on!!"

Cooper began to let go of his hand.

Robert had one last desperate thought. "Do it for your daughter!"

And with that, Cooper held on to Robert's hand with a reborn and regained strength, and was raised enough so he could hold on to the rope too. Slowly, they inched their way back up the rope, and just as it felt as if the rope would snap or tear itself apart from their weight, they got all the way up from the hole and collapsed on the ground of the passageway.

As they rushed out of the passage, they still didn't get a break. The cave once again rumbled and began collapsing all around them again, and Robert ran with all of his might, not looking back, alongside Cooper. Rocks and sharp spikes fell right behind them, blistering the skin on their backs. As they reached the light of the sun in the narrow passage, the last thing that Robert felt before taking a leap of faith forward out of the cave was a a tremendous weight on his back.

The cave behind them had collapsed—it was over. Robert, exhausted and dirtied from the caves, turned around to check on Cooper. They were both

absolutely wasted—but they had made it. They made it.

"Good riddance," said Cooper. They both laughed.

After a while, Robert and Cooper made it back to the site of the plane wreck. They set up a campfire with the last of the matches from the plane's emergency supplies.

"So, where are we going now, then?" asked Cooper, examining the plane's map.

"Well, I'm going out there."

"What do you mean? You just showed me, it's not even mapped out. And besides—in that cave, and, all of this—I just have a bad feeling about it."

"We can climb the peak of the mountain, see what's up ahead."

Cooper laughed. "Robert, those British guys went up there. It's cloudy—misty—you can't see it. And it's too risky because the sandstorms reach up there."

Robert said nothing for a moment. "No matter what, I'm going out there, Cooper. I can give you supplies for you to return home. But other than that..."

Suddenly, Cooper spotted something in Robert's pocket—the bracelet. It shone against the sunlight like a jewel. He asked to see it. Robert accepted.

"Jesus, this really is opal, is it?"

Robert felt anxious with the bracelet out of his possession. He snatched it away, and saw something form within Cooper's eyes. Something new.

"They lied to us, didn't they?" said Cooper. He started chuckling. "Damn. I should have taken Earl's offer."

It was happening again. Robert had to stop him. "Calm down, Dan. This happened to Allanby too."

Before Robert had a chance to say anything, Cooper grabbed Allanby's backpack and walked off. "I'm sorry, Robert." said Cooper. "I'm doing this for my daughter, remember that."

"What's wrong with you?" asked Robert. Cooper didn't reply, and instead, simply walked off into the desert. Robert felt like going after him, but his energy was completely wiped out—from the cave, the crash, the snake bite and all. All he wanted to do was sleep.

But Robert was left with a sense of deep betrayal. Now he was completely alone—two people had left him. He felt like a failure to the world. Why had Cooper left? Did he really just want opal, or had he somehow sided with Allanby's brother? What was he supposed to do now, alone in the desert? *Why do I always end up alone?*

Robert eyed his bracelet.

Yet he had a strange urge to just keep moving forward. He felt the serpent calling to him—a sound that he now realized he missed. Its golden eyes flashed into his eyes once again—telling him to go. To climb the peak.

His body was no longer in control of himself. The serpent blinded his vision—its rainbow scales golden eyes shining across his entire field of view, as his legs began to run up to the peak of the mountain—the fifth peak of his father's journal.

Robert desperately attempted to gain control of his hand. His legs were now searing with hot, aching

pain. He felt the air push him forward as he reached higher and higher towards the peak of the mountain in what felt like seconds.

Slowly, his hand lost contact with his mind. It grabbed the bracelet, held it tight, and Robert continued to blindly scale the mountain—until he stopped—and collapsed.

Robert's mind cleared and the vision of the serpent disappeared. He looked out from the top of the mountain, from the fifth peak—and observed the distant desert. Behind him, he could see absolutely nothing. It was blurred from him, as is he was a half-blind man. It was out of his allowed reality.

In front of him, Robert felt like an eagle, soaring in the sky—he saw the most beautiful sight of an all-encompassing desert, expanding all the way into the horizon. As he focused on the endless red sands, he saw something—something massive—sand that seemed slightly darker than the rest, outlining the shape of something familiar—the shape of a serpent gliding across the desert sands.

Robert reached out his hand towards the outline of the serpent. He wanted to get down into the desert, and he needed to find the serpent. More than life itself.

Suddenly, a giant slithering tail appeared in front of him, as if it was a part of the sky. Robert jumped down on the serpent's tail and began to slide down on it, all the way from the peak of the mountain and down into the desert below—right on the edge of the serpent's outline.

Finally, just as he was about to hit the ground at an amazingly fast rate of speed, sliding on its tail

tail—his mind and vision cleared, and it all turned to black.

Robert woke up from his deep slumber, only to find that it was day once more, and the heat of the sun was burning the skin of his back off of him.

He stood up. He first checked his pockets—in his right, the bracelet was still there—and in the back of his cargo pants, there still lay the blue stone which Ajay had given to him. It was more important than his own life. Robert sighed in relief.

But his relief did not last long. His hunger was strong—it ached in his stomach. It demanded to be fed. In the distance, he saw a large emu, walking around carelessly, not noticing Robert at all. Robert thought about just chasing it—attacking it with his bare fists, just for a chance at tasting some food—he did not care about any form of logic in that moment.

Just then, a boomerang whizzed past him. He followed it with his gaze and watched it lightly scratch the emu's face, causing it to sprint away, and he followed the boomerang on its journey back around, all the way to a small dark-skinned boy with three white stripes painted on his face, who caught it in his right hand.

"Palkarra wirriya!" yelled the boy. He ran towards Robert at a dizzying speed, and raised his boomerang, preparing for battle.

Robert braced himself for impact.

29
THE BOY

As the boy's footsteps rapidly closed in on him, Robert took the bracelet out of his pocket held on tight to it, praying that he wouldn't soon feel the boomerang stuck in his chest.

Luckily, the footsteps in the sand stopped right in front of him. Robert looked up from his fetal position only to see the boy, who was entranced by the bracelet that Robert was holding.

Why was everyone so obsessed with the bracelet? Was it the opal? He had no choice—he had to give the bracelet to him. It was life or death by boomerang. Robert handed the bracelet over to the boy.

The boy examined it for a while, as if it was the most fascinating thing that he had ever seen in his life. Eventually, he handed the bracelet back to Robert and offered his boomerang to Robert, as if it was a gift of peace.

Robert examined the boomerang, not wanting to offend the boy, as it was a clear signal of respect and boundaries—like hunting a snake, or approaching a fellow hunter in the wild. The boomerang was painted white, blue, and red. It was old and faded now, but it clearly did the job as it had dried blood on it—hopefully, not human blood.

He handed the boomerang back to the boy and smiled at him. "Robert," he said, pointing to himself.

The boy began to sputter out rapid sentences in his strange Aboriginal language, which Robert was clueless to understand. Finally, the boy said "Jira," and pointed to himself, which was clearly his own name.

Jira raised his finger and pointed it behind Robert. Robert spun around, thinking he would see some sort of giant spider behind him, or a polar bear, perhaps—but instead, he saw a trail in the sand—one massive in width, creating an outline of a serpent. It followed directly behind Robert as if it had been attached to him, as if it was some sort of massive prank that his students had set up for him while he was passed out drunk—but this was no prank. This was very real. The boy confirmed that it was not just his own insanity. And this terrified him deeply—it was the first time that he had to acknowledge the realness of his strange dream of riding the serpent's tail.

Robert looked back at the boy, who looked at him in amazement. What entranced Robert the most about it all was the way Jira looked at him. He stared into Robert's eyes almost like Ajay had—knowing full well the fear behind him and still accepting it, knowing the true desperation of the current state of his soul, but letting him go on with it regardless.

Finally, a thought came into Robert's mind, and he said one word: "Goorialla."

Jira immediately stopped in his tracks, seemingly alarmed at first, but then aware.

Robert decided to further their connection and waved his hands around his mouth, simulating food. Jira smiled and threw the boomerang.

One...

Two...

Three...

And within seconds, it came back to him. A large bird dropped on the ground beside Robert, as if it was fast food.

Robert was amazed, not only by the boy's boomerang skills, but also by how there was so much life in such a lifeless place as the Outback. How one could survive here—and especially as a human, a young human, not even fully grown. Robert guessed that the boy was on some sort of a walkabout, and was trained for it well.

And if he was on a walkabout—there must be some sort of a settlement nearby.

Jira motioned for Robert to eat the bird—raw, of course. Surprisingly enough, Robert had never eaten anything raw before in his life, but he had no other choice. He bit straight into the bird and took a chunk of its chest. He was so hungry, that it tasted like a well-done steak at a five star restaurant.

Without another word, the boy walked off into the distance, exactly where Robert was aiming for in his frenzied run, and the boy began to sing a song. As Robert heard the word "Goorialla" come out of his mouth, he realized that the boy was singing the story—the story of the rainbow serpent.

Jira was guiding him.

Robert had no idea who the boy was, how he appeared here, where he was, or even who Robert Forrest truly was, or how the boy seemed to know

who he was from one look at him. But something inside him, like always, kept him going.

It was not a need for fame. It was not greed. It was something else—something different. He was exactly where he was supposed to be at the right time and at the right place—he knew it in his heart.

Robert went onwards, following Jira into the distance, as he sang the song.

30
SONGLINES

They walked on and on for hours. Jira kept singing, but noticeably different songs. Robert started to feel thirst coming into his mouth, and wondered how this boy had survived for so long without water.

The Australian Outback was one of the most dangerous places in the world. People have been stranded there after getting lost on tours, and died within hours, even without any venomous creatures. Just from the heat. Yet Robert had survived for what felt like days. Time was strange here, wherever this was.

Then—just as Robert had almost had enough of his thirst—Jira stopped. He looked around, smiled, and continued his singing.

Like a bloodhound—catching a scent.

Every once in a while, Jira would throw the boomerang or fashion a spear and catch something, offering the meat to Robert as "Jayappi." Robert quickly learned the vital words of the boy's language, and developed a small working vocabulary.

Ironically, he still didn't know the word for water. And to make his desire for it worse, just a few hours ago, he was on a plane surrounded by water.

Robert had enough. He walked up to the boy, and knowing full well that he didn't speak English, said

to him, "I need water! Don't you understand? It's a basic human need! I need water!!"

Jira looked at him and smiled, as if amused at Robert's own frustration. Then, he dug his fingers into the golden yellow sand and drew a line pointing to what seemed to be a large red rock in the distance, which had a distinct eagle-like bird sitting on top of it. He began to sing—this time, a different song.

Robert, as he focused on it, immediately recognized it from his father's journal. A large red rock, the first thing that came from the caves. It was then that Robert felt he was lucky to have his photographic memory.

A word was written alongside it in the journal—Robert struggled to remember—and then it came to him, and he said it at the same time as the Aborigine boy had:

"Wapiji."

Robert laughed at himself for a moment. How he could be so blind to what was somehow sent to him. He had asked for an answer from the bracelet, and it had given him one—a guide.

Just as he was the guide for the expedition, this boy was the guide for the other side—where no white man had ever set foot before.

Robert's thirst was soon replaced with excitement. He felt by the boy's energy that they were getting close—to something.

Jira began singing again, this time frantically. He ran his fingers along the sand and quickly scurried across towards the big red rock, like a wild animal. Robert followed after him, filled with adrenaline, running like the wind.

Finally, Jira stopped and tasted the sand. Robert tasted it too, and spit it out in disgust.

"What, is this some sort of Aborigine food?" he said.

Jira simply said: "Jiwiri." He began to dig underneath the rock—and soon hit dirt. Where there was dirt—there was mud—and where there was mud—there was water.

And water, sure there was. Eventually, the boy had dug so deep that he had gone and found water, and Robert desperately drank from it like a dog.

He took off his shirt and wet it, then put it around his face and neck like a towel. He had learned this from his father and passed it on to his show, on one of the fake scripted segments for his own personal walkabout episode. Only this time, it was real. And with a very real serpent waiting in the shadows.

The boy began to sing again. This was the same chorus that he repeated previously. This time, it came to a finishing tone. It was the chorus of the rainbow serpent—of Goorialla—a song line.

Suddenly, something erupted out of the sand in the distance, making both of them fall on their backs. Robert felt a deep rumbling from the ground, and lay flat on the ground, thinking that it was an earthquake.

But this was no earthquake.

Without warning, a rapid screech echoed throughout the landscape, piercing through his ears so loudly that it made him temporarily deaf. His eyes were blinded by a white light, and the last thing he saw was a figure—a figure of a serpent—its shadow gliding across the sky.

Robert closed his ears with his hands. He reached into his pocket for the bracelet, but felt nothing. Eventually, the rumbling stopped, and Robert stood up, only to see that the boy was in front of him, holding the bracelet up into the sky, and singing another song—this time, this one seemed to be out of pure desperation.

Robert grabbed the bracelet back from the boy and put it into his pocket again. He wanted to ask the boy about what just happened, but decided not to. They had more things to worry about now.

Additionally, they were both tired—Robert could tell. Jira motioned to the side of the rock, where they both mutually agreed through the look in their eyes that they had to make camp and rest.

As Robert lay down, he was surprised by the silence—he had heard birds, snakes, and all sorts of animals just minutes before. Strangely, the bird on top of the rock was now gone—and so was every living thing in their vicinity.

Robert decided not to question things, and instead, he helped the boy set up a campfire.

31
SPLIT UP

Robert and the boy spent the rest of the night telling stories to each other under the stars. The boy attempted to teach him how to use a boomerang, but Robert failed on many occasions.

They eventually settled down and simply started singing—or talking—in their respective languages. Neither understood the other but it was a comforting thing—just to sit down by a campfire and tell stories.

The desert eventually teemed with wildlife—scorpions, spiders, and snakes, some of which Robert had never seen before. It was clear that no man had been here before—otherwise, this place would have a highway and a pit stop in five seconds flat.

But he no longer cared about his own discoveries, or about catching rare types of reptiles. His mind was clear—he only needed to do one thing—and find only one serpent.

Deep into the night, just as they were going to falling asleep, the boy pointed at the North Star.

"Namrata Satara," said Jira.

The boy then began to sing. It was clear that he was referring to Goorialla, and he was in the next

part of the song. Robert recognized the rhythm, and even started to memorize some of the words.

Robert took out his bracelet and gave it to Jira. The boy then began to run around all the way to the back of the giant red rock, where Robert followed him, only to find a large snake print on the side of the rock like his team had found on the first sighting.

This startled Robert. It was clearly impossible for that print to be there, and the rock was lodged into the sand like a lobster barrel. There was no way.

As Robert touched it, he suddenly felt that all-too familiar feeling and his headaches and whispers began.

Robert fell backwards. His vision blurred and the voices seemingly overwhelmed the noise of the dead night. He grabbed on to his bracelet, but it only seemed to make things worse.

This time, the visions lasted particularly longer than usual. But this time, Robert recognized the strange language—it was the boy's language, speaking the lines of the first chorus.

As Robert's vision cleared and he woke up, he realized that it was already morning. He ran back to the campfire, only to see that it was burnt out and the boy was gone. An arrow pointed to the east, and Robert suddenly realized that Jira was referring to his home camp—he had finished his walkabout.

But Robert was not done with his. For Robert's walkabout, the boy had left behind his boomerang.

Robert grabbed it and moved on. He was in the middle of nowhere, but he did not feel lost. The lyrics and tone of the song resonated within his mind endlessly in a loop. He did not understand the

words, but at the same time, he understood all of the words somewhere in the back of his mind.

The second chorus sang of something called "Jiwiri", which Robert knew meant water. He remembered that his father's journal had a drawing of a lake on it, but there was no clear symbol before that except the big rock.

Had his father also taken a guide? Or had he guided the natives himself?

After a long time of walking, Robert started to genuinely miss Jira. He wondered how long the boy had been gone now. He wondered how long *he* had been gone now, from his home in the States. It felt like weeks, perhaps even months. Time was funny in this land. Ralph was probably missing him.

But it was too late to go back now. He had no instructions for returning home, only for moving forward.

Hunger and thirst evaded Robert like the flicker of a flame. It was as if his body knew that he had it but his mind was focused on the beyond—like a hot fire—it knew where Robert Forrest had to go and what he had to do.

Robert instinctively recognized the landmarks—a small white rock, almost like a pillar, extending to the size of a large man. And then—in the distance—he saw it. A small figure of a house—just like something familiar to him.

After a while of running, Robert approached a large wooden cabin, which looked like it was falling apart. It was surrounded by many collections of smaller cabins—Robert remembered what this was. He had been here before. The familiar smell of molten fire came to him again.

The large cabin immediately ignited Robert's senses. He felt a deep sense of nostalgia for it, and stepped inside.

32
OLD TOWN

The cabin smelled of sweet oak, and felt like home. Real home. Robert remembered being led here many times by his father. Sitting by the porch. Walking along the sides of its beautifully furnished wooden exterior.

It looked as if someone had lived there only a few months before—the bed was well made with clean sheets on it and there was still a nightstand and other furniture. Something caught Robert's eye the most, however, as he looked on to the nightstand.

There was a picture of his mother—and his father—on a stand, right there on top of it. Robert felt like he wanted to cry. This confirmed it—that it was all real. As he grabbed the photo from the nightstand, the memories all started to flow back—of his father, and his mother...

But he had no time to become distracted. Not yet. Inside the drawer, there was another letter—it was signed in his father's own handwriting.

On the masthead of the leader, Robert saw that familiar "POWELL" logo once again—he still had no idea where it was from, but he knew that he had seen it before.

As he read the contents of the letter, he was immediately taken aback by what he was reading. It shocked him.

"Dear Mr. Forrest,

It has come to our attention that the requirements to our deal have not yet been met. As such, we will be forced to suspend your royalties to the mining contract.

Regards,
Tess Powell
Godspeed."

A million questions rang through Robert's mind. Was this what John Kamen was doing? Were these the same people who came to his house all that long ago? Was his father trying to protect his family, or did he destroy the very town he was standing in?

Perhaps the mining—all of it—was started by his own father. Perhaps it was all his fault all along—and Allanby's brother was just the aftermath of it.

The song had led him here, after all. The second landmark. But he had no idea what to do, or what to think, next.

Suddenly, a deep roar in the distance caught Robert's attention. He hid the letter in his pocket along with his bracelet.

He ran outside. Two black Jeeps were there, steadily approaching him. It seemed as if they were the same ones he had hitched a ride on all of those nights ago to get to the mountain the British team was mining.

Robert hoped that perhaps they were policemen, or rangers, but in the back of his mind he knew they weren't. He knew that it was them. Why did the bad guys always have to dress in black?

Robert searched for a place to hide, but he had no place to hide in such a large desert. He had already

been spotted. He had no choice but to confront the men.

As the Jeep neared closer, Robert's heart leapt out of his chest as he saw Allanby through the windshield. But when the figure got out of the car, Robert realized that it was not in fact Allanby, but Allanby's brother, Earl. Still, not much of an improvement. As the Jeep braked, Robert saw that Allanby had a gun in his hands, and Robert instinctively raised his hands in surrender.

Out of the back of the car got out Cooper, which shocked Robert the most. He seemed completely sane, not ridden with desert fever, and not a captive.

Cooper smiled, but seemed shocked at Robert's appearance. Robert realized that he had become so outsourced from society over the days that he was likely looking like a prehistoric caveman. Torn up clothes, dirty appearance, no doubt covered up and painted in mud.

"Nice to see you, old friend," said Cooper.

"Let him go," said Robert.

"Oh, he's not my captive," said Allanby's brother. "He's my boss."

Robert was shocked. Did Cooper just have a sudden chance of heart and decide to become the leader of the Opal Nazis?

But he had no time for questions. "What do you want?"

"We've been following your crazy map for days. It led us out of the caves—mostly," explained Allanby. "And then we found the mountain. It took us a while, but we did it."

Were they talking about the water mountain that Jira led him to? Robert thought back to the story his father had told him, and the map, but he did not

remember any particular mountain—not one of value, anyways.

"Why do you need me?"

"Oh, we've been looking for you for a while," said Cooper. "We found one of the natives hiding something. A river. A giant mountain of opal isn't enough for our Japanese investors, apparently. We needed more. And when I met you in the cave, I knew that you knew where it was."

"What happened to you, Cooper?" said Robert, truly meaning the question.

"I need the money, that's all. It's not personal, it's just business. Now—we know you have the map. Where is it?"

"I have no idea."

"If you had it once, it's in your mind forever. I know how your mind works. And you know where the river is. So let's go," said Cooper.

And with that, Robert was forced into the car, and they drove off into the distance, heading for their impending doom.

33
NARALULLGAN

The entire drive took a matter of minutes—Robert was amazed that he was that close to the mountain already, just by singing and following the boy's song lines. But what scared Robert the most was the fact that Cooper had his personality twisted so much for the matter of some shiny rainbow-tinted rocks.

Soon, they reached a large red mountain. It was beautiful. Just like the false snake, it appeared as a brownish red, but as he came closer, it appeared to have a rainbow tint to it—but this time, the tint came from millions of tons of opal. A group of dozens of men were mining all of it away—to make matters worse, there was the boy, Jira, who they had kept captive right in the middle of the campsite like a slave. And then—Robert noticed even more Aborigine men, who were chained and forced to mine with at the mountain with pickaxes.

The boy immediately recognized Robert, and was discretely calling out to him under the guise of simple bird sounds—something you couldn't do back in Deeragun with the lack of birds and all. But here, in this sacred land, you would boomerang birds.

Robert was amazed at the whole operation, and at the same time, he felt connected to it, with the

mountain being stripped of all that it had. The boy looked at Robert with the most terrified eyes ever. Robert gave him a look as well, trying to convey that he would rescue him soon. He would have to. The boy would not last long in chains, after all.

Robert got out of the car. Allanby grabbed Robert and led him up the big red mountain. The first word that popped into Robert's head, staring at the mountain's majesty, was; "*Naralullgan.*" He could remember the map—and his father's story—it was coming together in his mind. He knew what this mountain was. He did not know the words to the final song line but he knew that this mountain was the key—he was close to wherever the rainbow serpent was.

"What are you doing with that boy? Let him go!" said Robert.

"That boy? Oh, he's just our new guide," explained Earl. "You don't think I know that you and my brother crash-landed here?"

Robert decided not to ask about Allanby. He was shocked at what Earl had now become, and what he had done to Cooper. Were they both simply just under the influence, hypnotized by the power of the land or the greed from the opal?

"You see," explained Earl, "This place used to be a thriving town. Built by settlers as a secret town, rich from the opal mines."

Earl pointed to the boy. "But the *natives* realized that they didn't want to share anymore, so they closed off the land, and built their own town here, hiding all of their precious opal."

"Why are you doing this, Earl?" asked Robert.

"I'm not some criminal mastermind, Robert. I just need some money. And I don't like people who don't share," he explained.

Earl walked up to Jira, who continually stared at Robert. "So, you're gonna give me the map, wherever you hid it, or you're not gonna see this boy ever again."

Robert said nothing. "Tell me, why do you want to find this snake so bad, if that's really what you're after?" asked Earl. "Do you really just want the fame and recognition, is that it? Or do you just want to avenge someone, perhaps?"

Before Robert could answer, a deep roar approached from the distance. He suddenly felt a terrible rage fill up inside of him—not coming from within him, but radiating from something ahead. Robert now noticed that there were multiple drawings of the rainbow serpent scribbled into the walls of the mountain.

"Sandstorm!" called out one of the men. Out of everyone on the mountain, the chained and roped natives seemed the most panicked of them all.

"Oh, no," said Earl.

As Earl was distracted, Robert saw it as his chance. He quickly punched him in the jaw and purposefully fell down on the mountain, sliding on the smooth rock exterior all the way down to the ground floor. Robert grabbed the sharp edges of the boomerang hidden in his pants, and he used to slice at Jira's ropes.

Before long, they were both free, but gunshots rang out at them—multiple gunshots. Robert gave one last desperate bid for the boy's freedom and threw the boomerang out into the men who were firing at them, then began to run rapidly with Jira,

heading for the cabin. They had no time for the other chained men—they would have to make it out themselves, somehow.

Eventually, in a matter of seconds, the sound of ever-approaching doom arrived at the site of the mountain. The shooting and shouting stopped as everyone in the mountain dove for cover.

Just before Robert closed his eyes to prepare for the storm, he noticed that the boomerang had returned back to him, and grabbed it before closing his eyes shut and blindly running forward, holding Jira's hand alongside himself.

The edges of the storm just slightly scraped Robert's back. He looked back, only to see that the site was already overwhelmed by smoke and sand.

By the time they reached the small abandoned town, the screaming from the site slowly faded away, or was simply drowned out by the noise. Either way, everyone in that mountain was either dead or buried alive by the roaring sand.

Robert lost the boy's hand. He had no time to worry—Jira was smart. He would find one of the cabins. Robert immediately ran into the first cabin he saw and closed all of the windows.

The storm hit the cabin like a lightning strike. He immediately felt it shift in its foundations, as if a giant bulldozer was pushing it from all directions.

Robert dove under the bed and hid there. He closed his eyes and grabbed on to the bracelet tightly, praying that the cabin would hold and the storm would go away. There, he suddenly felt a deep presence overwhelm him.

Without any warning, Robert fell into a deep sleep once again.

34
EYE OF THE STORM

Robert stared into her eyes. The Jeep crashed. It played in his head over and over again. Over and over.

The storm didn't matter—nothing scared Robert more than to stare into her eyes. Her cold, lifeless eyes.

Finally, he looked into her eyes—cold, lifeless, reptile eyes. The eyes where you know the soul is missing. But he didn't see that. He didn't see a husk of what once was. Instead, he saw something new that he hadn't seen before—he saw a container of beauty, a soul that had now moved on. He saw hope, love, and destiny.

"*It's not my fault,*" said Robert.

"*It's not my fault.*"

"*It's not my fault.*"

Robert let out a cry of relief, which resonated all throughout his life, his past and present, his dream and his current reality. The cry was so powerful that it overpowered the storm itself.

Suddenly, his entire life began to flash throughout his eyes like scenes from a movie. And he saw it—the serpent's tail, cascading throughout all of it, guiding his every action just as he had once slid on it, leading a trace of itself in every second—every moment—of his life. And when he saw it, he saw

something more—and realized something beyond himself.

Around him, the cabin began to shake and tumble until one plank of the wall collapsed, letting sand in. And then another. And another. This continued until the entire house began to shake and rumble and collapse.

Robert grabbed on to the bracelet. The sand began penetrating his bed, so he closed his eyes and thought of her eyes instead.

Finally, the entire house collapsed in on itself, letting out one great big bang. The storm cascaded throughout the entire world, so loud and powerful that it by itself destroyed any trace of home and started eating away at Robert's skin.

His last defense after the bed had been torn apart was his bracelet. Robert raised it up into the storm. He didn't care if his hand was torn apart. "STOP!" he yelled. "STOP!! STOP!!"

And just like that, the sandstorm lightened to a breeze. Robert brushed off his sand covered eyes and opened them to witness the beautiful blue sky of the early afternoon.

For a moment, he simply sat there, thinking of nothing. But something jolted him deep from within, and he had a new mission now. Now he could only think of the future, and the past was but a simple memory.

Outside of his obliterated home, the entire town had collapsed into piles of wood and timber and most of it had been buried under the sand. It was truly a proper burial for a once thriving town.

The boy was there too, under one of the smaller houses. His skin had become the sand. They walked towards each other and eventually, they began to

head east, over to Jira's village. Robert wondered if it had been taken over as well, in this warzone of an environment.

Robert followed Jira. He was now calm, not worried about where he was going or what he was doing any longer. He was completely in the present. The boy sang another song, and this was not a song of Goorialla, this was a song of his home. Robert could tell because Jira sang it with such a deep nostalgia. It made Robert think of his own home and Ralph, and how the snake would miss him, but was probably doing well.

Eventually, Robert started to sing the song too. They both repeated it over and over, and Robert eventually memorized it for the duration of their hour-long walk.

The desert seemed different. The sand had given itself a wash, a fresh start. The animals seemed friendlier and more outgoing with the humans that walked amongst them, and the scorpions were now gone. No flies had even bothered with them anymore.

Robert recognized the large mountain Naralullgan, the red mountain of the rainbow serpent, in the distance. It was covered by red sand, and all of the mining holes had been filled up. Hands and feet of people occasionally popped up—some moving, some not.

For the first time, Robert recognized snake prints in the sand. He saw the scenery in a new way—he saw the gorges of the snake, the markings of the serpent. How the land had been shaped, expanding back to millions of years ago up to the very point that he observed it.

He looked up into the sky, and suddenly felt a deep sense of acceptance within his own place in the universe. He was an initiated man, and he understood the laws of the world.

And then, after a long while of walking that had felt only like a few minutes—Robert saw the two rivers meet. They had made it.

35
TWO RIVERS MEET

Eventually, the pair made it to a small camp in a more wooded area—Robert was happy to finally see two rivers, not just one—each with nice and clean freshwater that he could drink from—not dirty water from a hole.

Along the two rivers, there were small tents or "humpies" surrounding a large campfire in the middle. Robert recognized them from documentaries about the natives of the land. Aborigine men were walking all along the camp, not paying attention to them as if they already knew they were coming.

And right at the centre of the camp—tied to a pole, just like the men at the mountain had been—was Fred Allanby, who was still alive, surrounded by angry Aborigines.

Even worse, the men surrounding him soon turned their gaze to Robert and then—spears in hand—dashed towards him until he too was surrounded by angry Aborigines. It was like the feeling of being hopelessly trapped by the boy's boomerang times a dozen, except this time, Robert was calm. Robert raised his hands and dropped the boomerang on the ground.

An older man, with long, frazzled white hair similar to Ajay's, seeming to be the leader of the

camp, came up to them, turned to Jira, and hugged him. It was clear that this boy was his son, in some way. The man pardoned Jira with his hand and the boy left, with a final smile to Robert. Robert gave him a look as a plea for help, but the boy ignored him.

He sighed. Once again, he had been betrayed—all that rescuing and for nothing. The man turned to Robert. "Naj kalamaratat?" he asked him.

Robert distinctly recognized some of the words, but did not know enough of the language to form a reply. Instead, he reached into his back pocket. The men with spears surrounding him immediately yelled at him and Robert froze.

"They want you to prove yourself!" called out Allanby, from the back. Robert recognized that his voice seemed to be different—almost broken. What had they done to him?

Still, Robert took out the blue stone that Ajay had given to him from his back pocket, and as one last desperate attempt, he raised the stone as if it was a giant sword or weapon of some sort. To his surprise, all of the men with spears immediately gasped and ran off, dropping their spears with them.

All except the older man with long hair. The man, instead of being filled with fear, seemed shocked—almost hypnotized by the stone. Almost as if he had seen it before.

Without warning, the old man came up to Robert and snatched the stone from him, and then he ran off into one of the small tents.

Robert had no time to retrieve the stone from him. He had to get to Allanby. By the time he came close enough to cut him loose, he saw that the tribespeople were observing both of them from a

distance, still fearing the power that Robert seemed to have as soon as he revealed the stone.

"I should have taken that stone from you when you nearly died from the snake bite," said Allanby. As he came up closer to him, Robert saw that he was in bad shape—sane, at that, but completely torn apart and bruised. It was clear that it wasn't the natives that did this—it was the Outback.

"What happened to you after you left?" said Robert. He had second thoughts about cutting him loose—he had almost forgotten from the blue stone that Allanby was a murderer. He was the one who killed Ajay. And somehow, the natives had known about it.

"I have no idea. One second I'm chasing my brother in some sort of a dream, and the next, a bunch of these Aborigines capture me and tie me up like a dog," he said. "So why don't you just give me that stone and then we can go find Earl?"

"I already found Earl. He's gone completely insane and taken Cooper down with him." He decided not to tell Allanby that they might also be dead. "I think that it has something to do with this land, or the opal—the smell of the opal. But anyways, I'm not letting you go. Not until you can pay for your mistakes."

"What? Wait, Robert!!" Robert walked away. He felt a little bad for leaving Allanby behind, but did so anyways, and ignored his cries as he made his way to the old man's tent, passing by dozens of Aborigines who looked at him as if he were a god.

Inside of the tent, the old man was sitting down by a fire, and he held the stone in front of it, coddling it like a newborn child. Just as it seemed

as if he was about to throw the stone inside the fire, Robert stopped him with a loud "NO!".

The long haired man immediately snapped out of his trance with Robert's arrival, and dropped the stone right next to the fire. He observed himself for a moment, and then stared back at Robert, and motioned for him to sit down next to the fire.

In heavily accented English, he said, "Come sit," his voice sounding like Ajay's own voice down to a par.

He spoke English weakly, as if the language had insulted his tongue. "Where did you find this stone?"

"A man named Ajay gave it to me. Do you know him?"

The man closed his eyes and smiled for a brief moment. It was clear to Robert now—this man was his father. The hair was a dead giveaway. Somehow, Ajay had been stolen away from him some years ago. Why else would one become so obsessed with a stone like that?

"My name is Jakamarra. I am the oldest of our tribe. I know everyone. Why are you here?" the old man asked him.

"I am here to find the rainbow serpent," said Robert. "But first, I need your help. They have some of your men."

"No. Sorry. You must leave now. We can provide food and water but if we let you in, they will find it too. Then more will come. I am sorry."

"Let me in? Let me in where?" asked Robert.

Jakamarra said nothing. Robert sighed. "They have already come. I just rescued one of your people from them—Jira. The rest are probably dead or buried. They were looking for opal in the big red mountain," said Robert.

Jakamarra paused, as if he was waiting for something else. "Naralullgan," said Robert. After he said that, Jakamarra smiled, as if he was happy to know that Robert knew the words of the rainbow serpent's story.

"If you came here with him, then you must be initiated. I can see it in your eyes now," said Jakamarra. "You are different from others who have come."

He paused for a moment.

"Tell me the story."

Robert knew that he was referring to the story of the rainbow serpent. And so, he did not only tell it to him, but suddenly, his mind cleared and Robert realized that he somehow remembered every song line, every word, every kind of rhythm that the boy had taught him along their journey—he suddenly understood, in front of the father of Ajay, all of the laws of life and nature and the Aborigine people. He remembered, and he sang it to him.

Jakamarra smiled at him. "So you do know the story," he said. "You are an initiated man."

He raised his hand and dipped it in the white paint in front of him, and then he put three fingers on Robert's face and rubbed it on him.

"Okay. You may go. And you may tell this story of the serpent to others. But I have a warning for you."

"What is it?" asked Robert.

"I believe that I know who you are. I believe that your father has come here before."

"What do you mean? What happened to him?"

Jakamarra pointed to Robert's right hand—and it was only then that he realized he had been holding the bracelet in his hands for the entire time. "Did he give you this? Or did you find it?"

"He gave it to me."

"Years, decades ago, we lived in harmony with the white people. They built a town here and we shared our resources together. You see, we had a rare rock which provided magical effects on human skin. They were allowed to take it, but on one condition—that they would not pass our great lake, for any man who passed there would soon die," Jakamarra continued to explain to him.

"One day, after years of peace, a man came to our camp with some other men and said that they would give us many resources and a great amount of opal in exchange for safe passage into the lake alone. He had found a great treasure beyond the lake—including that bracelet. All sorts of wonders, he brought back to us."

"And?"

"One night, my son, Ajay, got very sick. In exchange for permanent passage into the lake, the man found this very blue stone and he healed him. We were so amazed that we gave all of them full access into the lake."

"And so, he did pass it. But the men became obsessed with it. One day, they entered the lake and wanted more and more—every day, more and more. Your father had insisted that they could only cross the lake with him, but they eventually refused, and he was forced to go in after them. And that day, they never returned from their trip. Their clothes—and this rock—washed up on our beaches. Soon, the lake turned blood red. The sky turned black. We felt a deep rumbling and we knew that *he* had been awoken. A war began between us and those who did not cross the lake, and we banished the white people to the other land, as our land had been filled with

drought. And it was only then that I realized where this stone came from..."

"That's why I saw the town. That's why there are so many sandstorms. That's why the people were so desperate," said Robert.

"Yes," said Jakamarra. "Your father was filled with obsession. And it ruined us. We were attacked by a great being of darkness, all across the land. We nearly starved. We only survived because we built a small settlement on Naralullgan, the big red mountain—and we managed to survive there. Until the men came again. And do you know the true ending to the rainbow serpent story, Robert?" he asked.

"No."

"One of the people had cut Goorialla up as he hid away on a large mountain, only to find that the two brothers had turned into rainbow birds. The serpent got so angry that he turned everyone into the animals we see in the desert today. The mountain collapsed into many rocks, turning into a half circle. And then our people locked the serpent away. That is the full story," said the man.

Robert pointed to the stone. "So what is the blue stone?"

"Ah. It was the first treasure that they brought back to us, as a sign of peace and unity. For some reason, it could heal others—and it was attracted to some things. Animals seemed scared of it. It also seemed to bring good luck. The only way that one could cross the lake was with the stone, but when the men tried to cross the lake without it, they all died."

Robert paused for a moment. Now, the pieces fit together—why his father had given him the

bracelet, and why it had opal in it—why it was a great treasure. But he had another question—which he was hesitant to ask. "He was stolen away from you, wasn't he? Ajay?"

Jakamarra deeply sighed. "Yes."

"Well, they stole away my people too. And now they have stolen away yours. I need your help to reach the lake."

After a while, Jakamarra seemed to agree with his words and handed the stone back to Robert. "You take it. It is no coincidence that you have arrived here after so many years, just like your father had all those years ago. You must not repeat his mistakes—it is your destiny to avenge him, and to close the gate which he opened."

"But I am not going alone," said Robert. "I need you—and I need my friend, the one you have tied outside."

After a while, Robert stepped outside with Jakamarra. The other men looked at him as if they knew that he had become one of them, and they accepted him, like a brother, with a single look of their eyes.

"Straightened out a deal, haven't you?" said Allanby.

"We don't have to untie him, but we need him. Otherwise, there will be a great war," said Robert.

"That man killed my son," spoke Jakamarra.

"I am with him. Please—he deserves a second chance. And we need him." Robert took out the stone. "Forgiveness and unity, remember?"

"We never planned to kill him. We do not kill. But for others who kill, they must undergo a trail—a trail of spears."

With a wave of Jakamarra's hand, the tribesmen grabbed Allanby and led him to a small, isolated area of the beach, where he was encircled by all of the people of the tribe, who held spears in their hand, ready to fire.

"Uh, Robert?" said Allanby.

"Don't worry! You'll be fine! I saw this somewhere before, you won't actually die!" replied Robert.

Jakamarra, who was right next to Robert, was given the first shot. He threw it straight at Allanby's chest, but Allanby managed to narrowly dodge him. After that, each of the men threw their spears at him, and each of them narrowly missed his knee, or stomach, or chest, and even grazed his skin at some point.

As soon as he thought the trials were over, Robert was handed a spear by Jakamarra. It was then that Robert came upon the realization that it was not only the tribesmen who were affected by Ajay's death, but it was also him. It was also him and his father.

With all his might, no longer caring about it all, simply mad about his old friend's death—Robert lunged the spear at Allanby with all of his might. Allanby did not even seem to try to dodge it—as if he accepted his pain as in exchange for the loss of a life on that day—the loss of Ajay.

The spear pierced Allanby's shoulder and he fell backward. All of the tribesmen yelled and cheered as Allanby began to bleed onto the sand. Robert looked over to Jakamarra, who was simply staring at Allanby in awe—it was a mixture of sadness, victory, and also depression—he had avenged his son, and had completed the trial. But Robert could tell that he did not feel quite right yet.

His gaze left Jakamarra and the pair went up to check on Allanby. Allanby was groaning in pain on the ground. This was not as much justice as a jail sentence—but it was a start. Painfully, Jakamarra took the spear out of Allanby's shoulder.

To his surprise, the tribesmen began to chase Allanby away, poking at him with spears. Allanby could barely move with his shoulder bleeding rapidly.

"No! Stop!" Robert waved his hands and stopped them. No wonder this ritual was made illegal in the country—with his mind cleared from the anger, he realized that it was wrong.

"We are banishing him from the land. He is a killer," said Jakamarra.

"This is wrong," said Robert in reply. "We still need him in case his brother is still alive. He is the key to all of this."

Jakamarra seemed hesitant to comply, but he went through with it anyways. "I warn you, Robert, that if we banish him then we will save him. If we take him with us, he will likely die just as he has killed my son, Ajay. These are simply the rules of the land."

"Well, I live by the rules of the government, and I say this is wrong," said Robert.

"So be it."

And so, the men tied Allanby's hands. Jakamarra explained their plan to free their people, the men participated in a ritual where they sung a song and painted white stripes on their heads individually—the warrior's markings. Robert was given one too—Allanby was not. Instead, he looked at Robert for help, but Robert had done enough already by sparing him—Allanby had deserved the humiliation.

Soon, just as the sun was about to set and dawn, all of the tribesmen and Allanby stood up and passed along all of their spears and weapons, raising them and cheering a war cry. And then—they went forward, singing a song of the old times—a song of war.

36
WAR

Back at the big red mountain, dozens of tribesmen armed with spears hid behind a small rock, observing the site nearby. Jakamarra instructed each of them to grab some of the buried opal from the sand, and keep it with them, which confused Robert.

"This entire war is over opal," he said. "Why are we collecting it?"

"Is it not obvious, Robert? Why is there so much opal here, right in the open? Why have we managed to survive in a land ravaged by darkness? We need the opal—it is protection."

Suddenly, Robert remembered what Ajay had said—the rock is protection. He grabbed the rock out of his pocket and examined it—then, he smashed it on the ground, which then revealed a small crack with a passage to a massive opal stone underneath the hard skin of the rock, no doubt larger and more beautiful than anything he had ever seen before.

But what was the point? Why would Ajay want to give him a rock containing opal, so desperately that he had to die for it?

Robert put away the stone in his right pocket. After a few minutes, Robert had counted a few dead

bodies by the sand, but murmurs spread throughout the village when they saw Allanby's brother walking out with Cooper, taking a fellow tribesman with them.

Robert looked at the eyes of all of the Aborigine tribesmen who had come to fight alongside him, for their own people's freedom. They were angry, but filled with passion at the same time. They were ready to fight.

Robert stopped them. He now noticed that Cooper was yelling at Allanby across from the mountain, while Allanby was asking the tied Aborigine man for instructions. Beside him, Fred yelled out to his brother, but Robert closed his mouth with his hand. One of the tribesmen pointed a spear at his face, which made him shut up even quicker.

Faintly, from a distance, he could hear them saying, "There's more opal in the lake!"

Robert and the tribesmen eventually made their way to the top of the mountain for an ambush, where they saw a group of armed men who had survived the sandstorm.

Robert raised his hand and counted his fingers down to three.

Three.

Two.

One.

Finally, when he had reached the final finger on his steadily shaking hand, all of the tribesmen raised their spears, opened their mouths, and yelled, causing all of the soldiers to turn around only to witness a flurry of enraged tribesmen coming at them with spears, aiming and throwing them into their hearts. It was chaos—Robert couldn't even make out his left from his right.

The soldiers didn't even have time to aim their guns and shoot them. Spears knocked them down one by one, while Allanby and Cooper ran away, heading for the lake in the distance.

The spears that fell into the sand and had mixed in with the blood of men, from both sides, had turned the area beyond the mountain once again into a small sandstorm, with blood raining across the sky as a sign of terror—and war.

As the whole group reached closer across the bodies of soldiers and over to Allanby's brother, who was running away with Cooper, Robert noticed that beside him, Fred was gone. Even worse—as he instinctively checked for the stone in his pocket—it was also gone. He had lost it in the midst of the frenzied battle.

Soon, Robert spotted Fred in the crowd, running towards his brother. To his surprise, Fred tackled down the tied tribesmen they kept captive, held him down, and raised a stick of dynamite in his hand—plain in view for all to see.

Everyone froze. All warfare stopped.

"Alright!" he yelled. "Everyone, Robert, stop this now or I'll blow his damn brains out!"

Robert was shocked. The dynamite—somehow, he had gotten a hold of it—maybe it had been used to blow up the mountain for more opal. Maybe the whole thing was a ruse—an ambush, set up by the two brothers to wipe out the natives of the land once and for all.

"Let him go, Fred," yelled Robert. He was gentle in his tone, but at the same time completely confident in what he was saying and what he was doing.

Suddenly, Allanby winked at Robert. More groups of men ran out from the caves with guns, ready to attack.

It was an ambush.

Shots rang out and hit the tribesmen around Robert one by one. They had refused to wear armour, and instead proudly wore white stripes as a sign of courage for battle.

But it had been a bad decision. Within seconds, half of the tribesmen had been decimated. Earl looked back to Robert and gave him a victorious look. Robert could only witness the bloodshed that unfolded, as he saw an elder man collapse right in front of him, five gunshots springing from his body.

Robert ducked down behind a rock and tried to bury himself in the sand. Underneath, there was already a dead body, which caused him to yell and jump out.

Suddenly, Allanby let the Aborigine man go, grabbed the dynamite, and threw himself into the dozens of men with guns who had ambushed them. He didn't even give a final look at Robert before—

BOOOOOOOOOM.

The shockwave from the explosion sent Robert and everyone else ten feet back and into the dirt instantly, as well as causing temporary deafness.

The sand had cleared from the sheer power of the explosion, and some of it was briefly on fire. Robert dove in past the remains of the dead men to rescue the tribesmen from the burning sand—ignoring the fact that the opal in the mountain was now gone—forever. Their last weapon was now shattered into a million pieces, along with the precious one of Ajay's.

In the distance, Earl stared at what speck of dust had now remained of his brother. His face produced just a small glimpse of sadness, anger, and pain. Just a glimpse, f what he had tried to hide so well, of what Robert had never seen in him before. And just like that, Robert saw a part of his soul tear apart.

Allanby's brother, along with Cooper, soon ran out of the battlefield to head for the lake in the distance. They knew that they had lost.

As the tribesmen escaped the fire, which was now cooling down and evaporating, Robert noticed that Allanby's brother had dropped his father's journal, and it was burning up. Robert simply stared at it, and watched the very last of his father burn away into ash—into nothing.

He wouldn't need it anymore. And nobody else needed to have it.

Robert grabbed on to the bracelet. Ajay's precious opal stone was now gone forever—but he still had his courage to help him and the people of the world who depended on him.

Behind him, the tribesmen gathered in a straight line, victorious, as they had taken back their mountain. Indeed, Allanby and the British men had died just as they had killed—in violent warfare.

Jakamarra came up to Robert, and touched his forehead. In his native language, he said, "*I wish you good luck*", which he knew Robert would not understand unless he survived his mission and returned back to them.

Their job was done. Now, it was Robert's turn to go after the last two men who were left alive—the last shockwave of his father's mistake.

37
EYES OF THE SERPENT

By the time Robert caught up to Earl and Cooper, they had already reached the lake, in their running like wild animals.

It was beautiful. It extended far beyond the horizon, and it looked so peaceful and calm that it felt like anybody could cross it. However, as Robert neared closer to it, he saw that the waters began to turn a much darker shade of blood red, and the sky around them began to turn black, like the colour of night. He felt something deep tremble beneath the ground.

Something was coming. *He* was coming. Now that most of the mountain had been destroyed—the opal gone with it—the serpent was free to reign once again. And it would come after the Aborigine tribesmen first.

Cooper turned back to look at Robert. A deep roar echoed beyond the lake. Robert knew that Cooper would do anything to get past the lake and find the treasure—anything for his daughter. He saw it in his eyes.

Robert gripped his bracelet. "No! We have to go back!"

Without warning, Cooper ignored Robert and dove into the lake, until he disappeared into the mist. A

desperate man, who would do anything, had done it all.

Earl came up to Robert with the most deranged expression of pure rage he had ever seen in his life, fists raised and ready to strike at Robert mercilessly until death.

Robert knew what he had to do. He simply stood still, and stared into his eyes, just like he had stared into the eyes of thousands of snakes before—man and reptile, master and servant, a god and subject.

The ultimate stare. An eye which grants one the power to control any animal as God has truly intended humanity to do. The eye of the herding dog. The stare of God himself, embodied within Robert.

Just as Earl had his fist inches off of Robert's face, he froze, simply entranced by his eyes.

They stared at each other for a while, a long while. All until the rage slowly disappeared from Earl's eyes and into nothing, nothing but the pure white light from the very same day of his innocent birth.

Finally, Earl collapsed on the ground and started to cry, finally truly grieving for his own brother's death.

"I never got a chance," sobbed Earl. "We fought. We never said goodbye."

"It's not your fault," said Robert. Earl looked again into his eyes—the eyes of the initiated man, the master.

"We were wrong. This has all been a waste of time. We were never meant to make it past the lake. What am I supposed to do now?"

"Just leave. Cross this desert until you reach Deeragun. Maybe you'll find it, maybe you won't. But if you do, you can start a new life back home."

Earl said nothing. He got up, and handed Robert a piece of his father's journal, the last, torn up piece of the map.

And with that, Earl left, heading to a place where Robert would never see him again.

Just then, the ground began to shake. Robert felt the bracelet in his hands vibrate and move toward the lake, as if they were electromagnetically attached to each other.

The leftover remains of the opal from the mines swiftly scurried past Robert's feet and into the water at the hundreds. The lake had now become completely red, coloured by blood, and the sky was darker than an unknowable black void.

Robert looked into the map in his mind. Across the lake, his father had drawn an invisible bridge. What did it mean? There was no bridge in the lake...

Robert closed his eyes and desperately thought of all of it—his memories—his life—his happiness. He thought of his father and his state of mind, the last thing that he did.

A leap of faith.

Finally, Robert calmly walked over to the edge of the water and stepped into it, blindly, ready to sink in at any moment. The rumbling stopped and the howls coming from beyond ceased, as Robert's foot felt—opal.

He opened his eyes. Thousands of chunks of opal, beautiful, rainbow coloured opal, had come together to form a perfectly secure bridge, exactly the same size and diameter and shape all around. Underneath the water, it seemed invisible, almost transparent, appearing as if a Robert was walking on water from a distance.

Robert walked forward. He walked and walked and walked until—he could see nothing but the endless horizon ahead of him and behind of him, until the water was now clear as day. And until the sky cleared up to a beautiful shade of blue without a single cloud to taint it.

Finally, in the distance, Robert saw that the water rise up like a giant tidal wave, but frozen in place, like a giant moving wall. As he neared it, it opened into a passage leading into a massive grassy field, just like in his dream.

Just as Robert stepped onto the grass, he felt for Ajay's rock in his pocket, and only then was taken away from the beauty of the waters surrounding him and realized that it was gone. He was truly alone in the world.

Behind him, the water fizzed and disappeared into ash, into nothing—until the entire place was covered in nothing but perfectly green grass plains—infinitely.

Robert walked on forward. He suddenly heard a faint yell—just like back at the caves—Cooper's voice.

"Cooper!?" yelled Robert. He had to find him and rescue him. After his voice had echoed seemingly endlessly across the plains, he heard a faint reply back, calling his voice—"Robert!"

Steadily, every moment, it echoed louder and louder—"Robert!"

"Robert!"

"ROBERT!"

"**ROBERT!**"

The final yell was so loud that it pierced Robert's ears like a dagger, as if the voice was right next to him.

He spun around. The voice of the echo returned back into the distance, this time into the opposite direction. And then it returned back, like a pierce, and then back to the original point.

It was a boomerang. Somebody was throwing a boomerang of voices at him, circling around him, like he was the prey.

As the voice neared back to him, Robert grabbed the stone and slammed it down into the field—stabbing it hard.

Immediately, it all shattered—the grass, the sky, everything. The landscape transformed into a grim, darkly lit dystopia, with bones and ash littering the ground—human skulls with every step of the foot to be had.

Up in the sky, a hole of light opened up, blinding Robert for a moment. Out of it, came the shadow of a serpent, infinitely larger and grander than anything that Robert had ever seen before in any dream, in any imagination, any comprehension.

As the figure neared ever closer to him, cascading around the sky like a kite, Robert tightly held on to his bracelet. Another voice—the voice of his wife—came on to his mind. This time, every molecule of the serpent's roar was inside him, louder than anything he had ever experienced before.

But he would not be fooled by the lies. He refused to be the prey any longer. "ENOUGH!!!" yelled Robert.

The voices stopped. In front of him, the rainbow serpent stood, its scales each having a beautiful array of rainbow patterning, by the sight of which Robert knew would be more amazing than anything he would ever see for the rest of his life.

And then—the serpent opened its eyes to face Robert—beautiful, golden eyes, which came into Robert's soul like a dagger. For a moment, he was briefly seduced by it, willing to die just to have a mere moment's more time to observe it.

But the bracelet slipped out of his hands. Robert grabbed on to it, and immediately revered back to his calm, aware self.

Standing to face an infinitely long and large rainbow serpent, no doubt more powerful than anything he could ever imagine, Robert yelled out to it: "Enough! Where is Cooper!?"

The serpent said nothing.

"Where is he!?" Robert asked again, but in the back of his mind, he already realized the truth of what had happened to him. He knew that the serpent had devoured him.

He looked down into the ground, as he stood on top of a skeleton head, perfectly shaped and polished—the final remains.

"You killed him!" realized Robert. With pure rage, he stared down into the serpent's eyes, and they both fought with each other, a battle of wits—a battle of minds.

But it was all pointless. Robert knew that he could not face off against such a creature—he was not the predator, he was the prey. He was the hunted. They were all the hunted.

But if Robert did not stand up to it now, it would be free—free to wreak havoc across the world. The world would be its hunting ground. Robert was the last hope.

Just as it all seemed lost—Robert suddenly remembered something deep in the back of his mind—a story, passed down from thousands of

generations ago—a story, which he had somehow remembered all to this day—it was meant for this day—like the infinitely long tail of the serpent which led his life up to this moment. He had remembered it—the song. The song of the rainbow serpent. He remembered, somehow, how his father had come here—how the serpent was first released out of the oblivion, and into the endless horizon—and he realized everything, at that very moment, and everything in his life came together—the key to the herding eye, the predators and prey of life—the reason why the tribesmen were safe from the serpent, and the British men had collapsed to it. Robert felt the bracelet—the bracelet made up of opal, in his hands. Robert laughed. That was the key—the key to all of it.

Robert raised the bracelet in view, revealing the opal inside of it. The serpent immediately screeched and fell back. So that was it—it was scared of the opal.

He saw it all—his father had opened the gate. He felt the gate opening—he felt the serpent's deafening roar, and he saw his father look upon it—and become devoured by it, becoming simply nothing but prey. His anger disappeared—this serpent was nothing. It was just an animal, hungry for food. It was his responsibility to close off the food, not his fault that they were attracted to the serpent's mouth, just as Robert was called to it by the visions and the voices and all of it. He was the predator—the master—and he had arrived. He would not be the prey anymore.

"What do you want?" the serpent's voice finally boomed, letting out a deafening screech across the room.

"My father came here years ago. He found you and woke you up, from where the native people trapped you," explained Robert. "I want to close the gate. I want you to fall back asleep, and I want you to never return back to our home world again."

Robert walked up to the serpent, raising the bracelet. The serpent coiled itself like a defeated animal, and opened its mouth with its fangs ready to strike. Robert could not capture this animal by hand—he was the animal who was being caught. But he had control of the rope. And that made him the predator of this game.

Suddenly, the serpent opened its mouth and fangs. Without warning, the bracelet slipped out of Robert's hands and into the serpent's mouth.

So much for his father's treasured possessions.

The serpent began to laugh, and it slowly propelled itself toward Robert.

At the last moment, Robert noticed something beneath the bones he was standing on—something glistening underneath it all.

The stone.

It was the stone. Ajay's stone, which was apparently so important that Ajay had to die for it. Robert quickly grabbed the stone, silently thanked Ajay's Jedi future-seeing skills—and within a second, Robert fell into the mouth, sucked into it like a vortex of darkness. Behind him, the only light turned into darkness—and he fell deeper into the mouth of the serpent.

At any other given situation, Robert would be defeated right now—but he was not. He now had the secret weapon that nobody else who encountered this room previously had—he had a stone, that appeared dirty and rough on the outside,

but on the inside, was the greatest weapon of them all. Robert smiled, and let himself be devoured, holding the stone in his right pocket.

Immediately, a shockwave of energy and light exploded from the stone, as it slowly dissolved its hard and rocky exterior and turned itself into a beautiful, rainbow opal, shining brighter than the sun, and erupted across the field, shattering the serpent's skin into nothing. As Robert fell out of the inside of the serpent, he watched as the serpent let out a terrible screeching sound and its scales dissolved into ash, slowly becoming nothing but dust. Finally, the eyes of the serpent, once golden—became grey and lifeless, just like the cold-blooded reptile.

Soon, Robert was raised up, and he was taken through a large vortex, a vortex of red and blue. Through it, he saw his life—the long walks in the beach, his snakes, their house, their friends, their old life, her face.

For a moment, he felt a deep sense of serene happiness—true, pure happiness that was truly indescribable. He had defeated the serpent—and with that, the land was now free from its wrath.

Finally, he landed, face deep into the ground—the dirt—this was Earth. It was much different from the land beyond the lake—it was real. It felt real.

He stood up, and saw that he was standing in the fields, by the large lake, of the half-circle mountain, the same restricted area that Lester found so beautiful that he had to go out of his way to tell Robert to look out for in the car window—the same place that his team had missed out on checking on that stormy day so long ago.

An even more beautiful site lied around him—dozens of rainbow snakes, every single part of their scales tinted with the same rainbow as that of the rainbow snake, each one of their eyes containing the golden majesty of the rainbow serpent, all of them scurrying around him, greeting him with the true warmness and friendship that Ralph had, that his friends had, that his wife had. That true part of the loving warm soul that Robert knew all beings had—cold blooded or not.

He grabbed one of the rainbow snakes and raised it up—it let him do so, with no hesitation at all, as if it knew who he was.

Robert stared into its eyes for a final time—those beautiful, golden eyes. He realized the truth—a truth beyond comprehension, which he suddenly understood, but he knew that nobody else could and would never understand again.

Robert gently placed down the snake and let it roam free with the others—and the birds—and the rats—and all the other animals of the world. He let it go for it to truly have it—freedom.

And with that, Robert went onwards, heading back to Deeragun, for the last time.

38
NO PLACE LIKE HOME

On April the 27th, Robert Forrest finally returned to the town of Deeragun, in Queensland of Australia. The townspeople there welcomed him back as the sole survivor of the ill-fated rainbow snake expedition, and greeted him with smiles and warm hearts.

When the police questioned him about the incident, he never told them about the rainbow serpent, or the lake, or what lied beyond the ash line. The cave later collapsed, and nobody would ever be able to cross it again.

Soon, it all turned into nothing but legends. The entire expedition became a small news story, until it grew old and stale and nobody but the town of Deeragun remembered it anymore. Robert only returned to the United States once, to bring back Ralph with him, and to attend Fred Allanby's funeral, where he was hailed as a hero.

At the end of the funeral, a hooded figure stood in the distance—Robert knew who it was, but they did not approach each other. They simply continued to lead on with their lives, separate from each other.

Robert returned to Deeragun, and settled there, adopting Mary. One night, when he was very old and there was nobody else left from the times of the

opal, Robert told the story of the rainbow serpent to Mary, this time, with a new ending.

The story continued to pass on for generations. Nobody else would ever find the rainbow serpent again.

THE END